The Story of SAIIINKOKU

3

Art by
Kairi Yura
Story by
Sai Yukino

Shoo
IT'S SO HOT THIS YEAR.
Chapter 9
THOUGH I CAN APPRECIATE HOW QUICKLY THE LAUNDRY DRIES.
fwap
fwap

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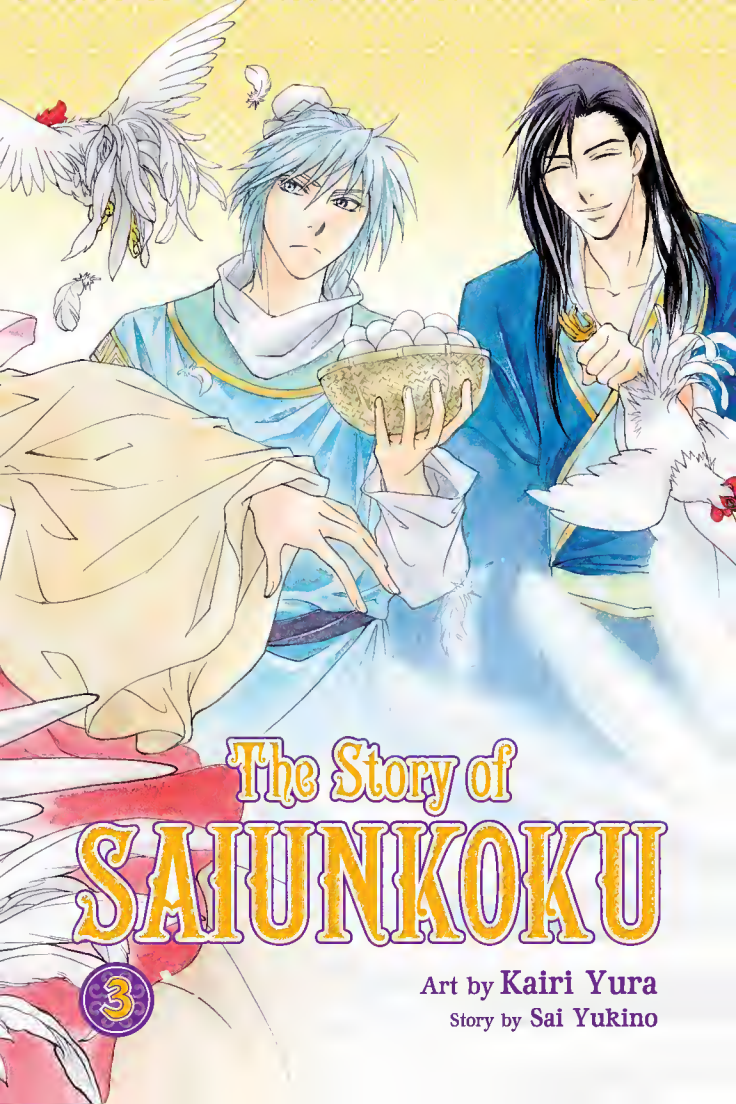

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Volume 3
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Story Thus Far

Lured by the promise of 500 gold ryo, the impoverished Lady Shurei of the noble Hong clan agreed to enter the Inner Court to serve as Noble Consort and private tutor to Ryuki, the young emperor of Saiunkoku. There, she encountered many new faces and experiences—both friendly and hostile—and after much toil, succeeded in instilling Ryuki with the will to govern his country properly. Her mission accomplished, Shurei departed the palace to return to her humble former life. It has been two months since that time. Saiunkoku's capital city looks toward the onset of summer, and Shurei is busy with the restoration of her dilapidated family home. However, another ill-boding but irresistibly enticing offer comes her way...

Ryuki Shi
The young emperor of Saiunkoku. He is widely known as an "idiot ruler," but it seems he has his reasons for appearing so.

Shurei Hong
A young noblewoman of the prestigious but impoverished Hong clan. She recently entered the Inner Court as Ryuki's tutor and erstwhile Noble Consort.

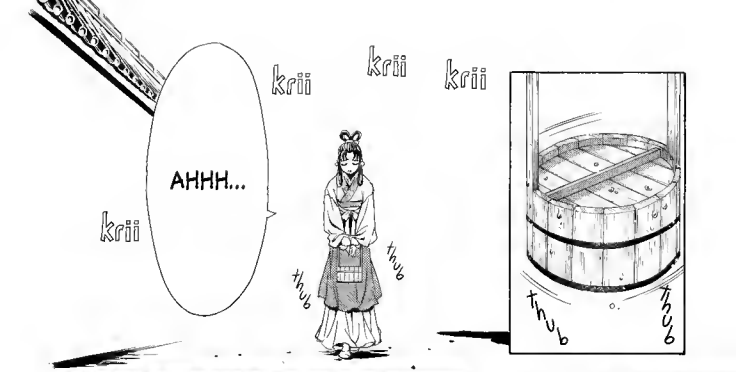
Seiran Shi
After being taken in by Shurei's father Shoka, Seiran has served the Hong household as its faithful retainer ever since. He is Shurei's protector.

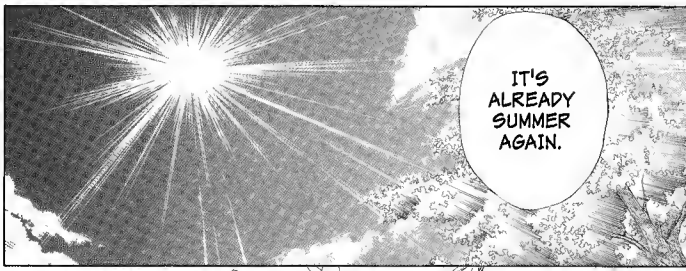
Koyu Ri
A civil servant renowned throughout the court as a genius, currently stuck in a frivolous position (perhaps!) serving Ryuki. He has a hopelessly bad sense of direction.

Shuei Ran
A military officer. He is a general of the Yulin Guard, a squad of soldiers charged with protecting the emperor. He is inseparable from Koyu (much to his friend's ire).

The Three Great Excellencies
Since the time of the previous emperor, three elderly advisors have served the throne: Lord Advisor Sho, Lord Advisor Sou and Lord Advisor Sa. They are scheming to advance Ryuki's education.

GOOD AFTERNOON, MA'AM! SOME TOFU, PLEASE.
OH!
OUR LITTLE SHUREI HAS REALLY GROWN UP, HASN'T SHE?
HUH?
IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU STARTED LOOKING AROUND FOR A GOOD MAN, I THINK.





IT WAS SPRING WHEN I RASHLY AGREED TO ENTER THE INNER COURT, THINKING ONLY OF THE 500 GOLD RYO I'D BEEN PROMISED.

TIME HAS PASSED IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE.

IT WAS MY TASK TO REFORM THE "IDIOT EMPEROR" AND MAKE HIM INTO A PROPER RULER.

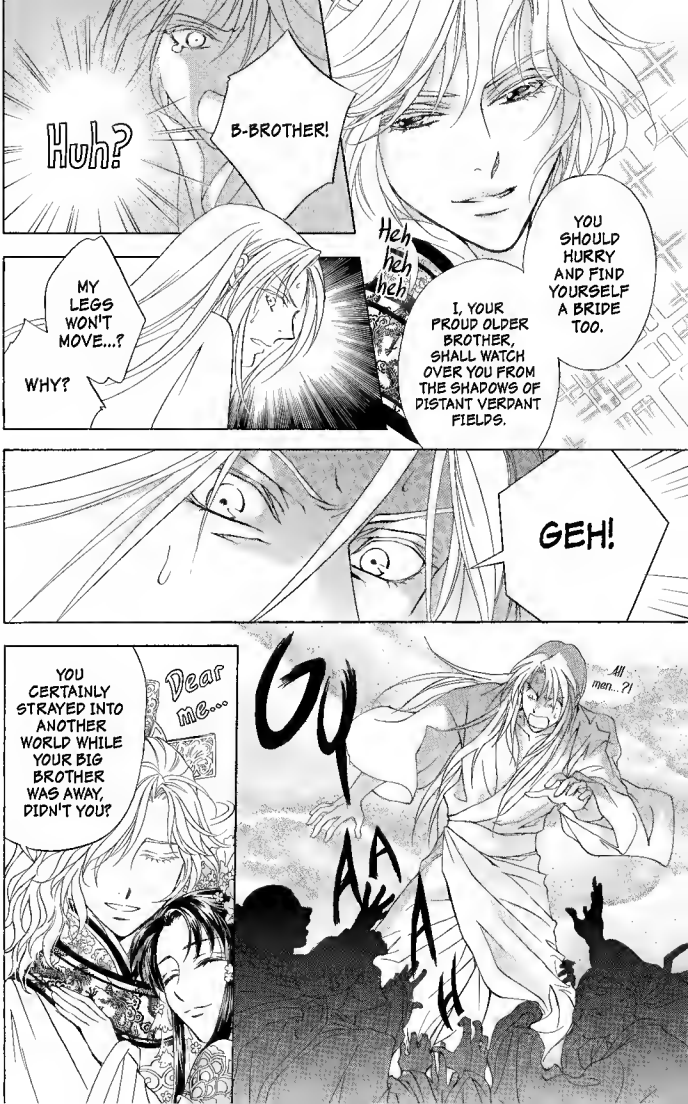
AND THEN I MET RYUKI SHI, THE EMPEROR OF SAIUNKOKU.
HE WASN'T AN IDIOT AT ALL.
HE WAS GLOOMY, WEEPY, ALWAYS LONELY... BUT ALSO SINCERE. WHEN PEOPLE SPOKE TO HIM, HE LISTENED EARNESTLY TO WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY.
YOU WILL SURELY BECOME A GREAT EMPEROR.
HOWEVER, ONCE I FINISHED MY TASK AND RETURNED HOME...
...I BEGAN RECEIVING LETTERS FROM HIM ON NEARLY A DAILY BASIS, EACH WRITTEN ON EXTREMELY EXPENSIVE PAPER.
"THOUGH IT IS QUITE LONESOME, WE HAVE BEEN FORCING OURSELF TO SLEEP ALONE EVERY NIGHT..."
AND EACH LETTER IS SIGNED "ANONYMOUS."

THEN A BLOCK OF ICE WAS DELIVERED TO OUR HOUSE.
IT WAS SO RIDICULOUSLY HUGE THAT IT BLOCKED OUR ENTIRE FRONT GATE. FOR SEVERAL DAYS WE HAD TO USE A LADDER TO GET IN AND OUT.
SOON AFTER, WE RECEIVED A DELIVERY OF EGGS.
NOT JUST ANY EGGS, MIND YOU— FRESHLY HARD-BOILED EGGS THAT WERE STILL STEAMING HOT!!
FOR A FULL TWO DAYS WE ATE NOTHING BUT HARD-BOILED EGGS AT EVERY MEAL.
UNTIL THE THIRD DAY WHEN THE REST OF THEM ROTTED AND SMELLED UP THE ENTIRE HOUSE HORRENDOUSLY.
THEN, TO TOP IT OFF...
GO TO ANY GRAVEYARD FOR COMMONERS AND YOU CAN FIND THESE YEAR-ROUND! AND WHY DID HE HAVE TO SEND SO MANY?!
"JUST BECAUSE IT'S SO RARE TO FIND THESE OUT OF SEASON," HE SAYS?
AND I CAN'T EVEN BEGIN TO IMAGINE WHAT HE WAS THINKING BY SENDING THIS STRAW DOLL!
I take it back! He is an idiot!

WELL, I'M SURE LORD "ANONYMOUS" DIDN'T MEAN ANY HARM...
HE MUST JUST BE NATURALLY GIFTED! GIFTED AT CAUSING PEOPLE IRRITATION!
THAT EXASPERATING PARADOX OF A MAN...!
AH, I NEED TO CALM DOWN.
PHOO
IF I GET TOO WORKED UP I'LL JUST OVERHEAT MYSELF IN THIS WEATHER.
THUD
AND OF SWEAT...
THUD
IT'S A WASTE OF ENERGY.
THUD
...WHICH MEANS A WASTE OF HOUSEHOLD RESOURCES!!
HUH?
FLUMP
WHO... IS THAT?

SUFF
SHUREI...?
I LOVE YOU.
AH... A GENTLE HAND...
I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO TELL YOU...
I LOVE YOU.
...DOING?
I SAID, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?
I'M GOING TO MARRY SEIRAN!
HUH?
HUH?!
MY OLDER BROTHER...?!

THAT'S HOW IT IS. SORRY, RYUKI.
HE'S DASHING, HANDSOME... AND HE GOES OUT TO EARN MONEY FOR ME! HE ALSO PROTECTS ME FROM DANGER.
SEIRAN IS MUCH MORE MATURE THAN YOU. HE'S GENTLE, STRONG AND COMPLETELY RELIABLE.
HE'S A HUNDRED TIMES MORE WONDERFUL THAN YOU. ♡
A HUNDRED TIMES...?
WE'VE LIVED TOGETHER FOR SO LONG, I THOUGHT IT WAS ABOUT TIME WE TRULY BECAME HUSBAND AND WIFE.
"TRULY"—Z!
DAZZLE
YOU'LL GIVE US YOUR BLESSING, WON'T YOU?
THIS MEANS I'LL BE YOUR OLDER SISTER FROM NOW ON!
I MAY COME OVER FROM TIME TO TIME TO BORROW MONEY FROM YOU, SO DO LEND IT TO US WITHOUT CHARGING INTEREST, ALL RIGHT?
DOOM
DOOM
WHAT? NO! WAIT—

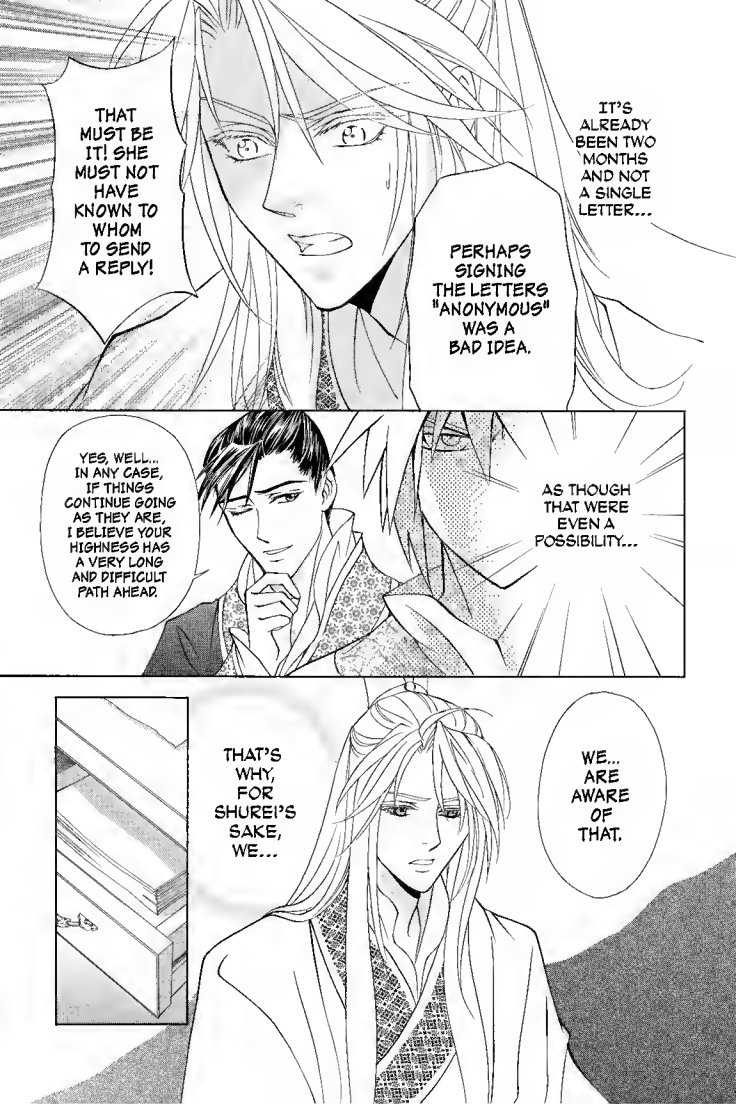

Huh?
B-BROTHER!
Heh heh heh
YOU SHOULD HURRY AND FIND YOURSELF A BRIDE TOO.
I, YOUR PROUD OLDER BROTHER, SHALL WATCH OVER YOU FROM THE SHADOWS OF DISTANT VERDANT FIELDS.
MY LEGS WON'T MOVE...?
WHY?
GEH!
Ah! men...?!
GYAAAAH
Dear me...
YOU CERTAINLY STRAYED INTO ANOTHER WORLD WHILE YOUR BIG BROTHER WAS AWAY, DIDN'T YOU?

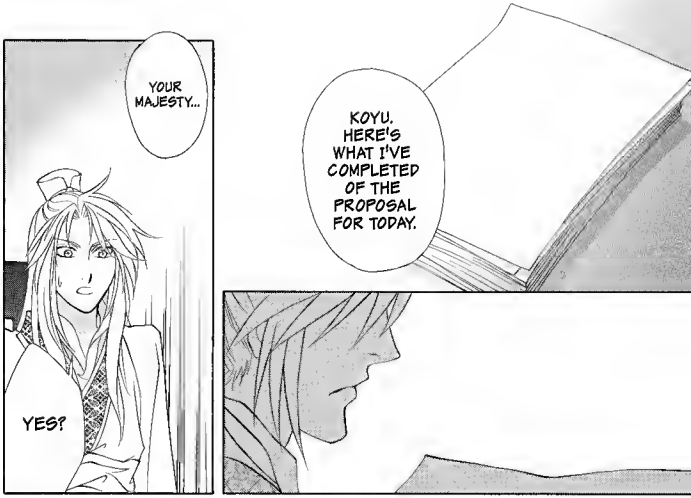
WAIT A MOMENT!!
GO AND FIND HAPPINESS HOWEVER YOU CAN THEN.
REMEMBER THAT NIGHT YOU ORDERED ME TO SLEEP WITH YOU? THAT CERTAINLY PUT ME IN A BIND!
B-BROTHER!
W-WAIT...!
THONK
THAT WAS HOW YOU FELL OUT OF BED AND ENDED UP WITH A BUMP ON YOUR HEAD?
...YES.

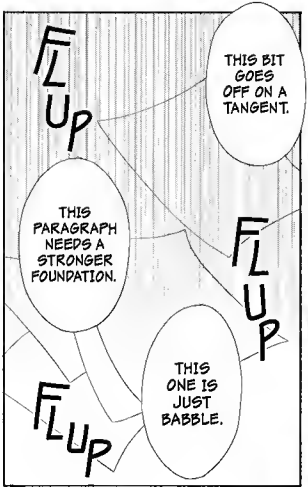
AH HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA HA
HA HA HA HA HA
PBFF!
BUT IT'S JUST SO—!
GET OUT.
SHUEI...
YOU'RE LAUGHING TOO HARD.
WELL, IT DOES SEEM QUITE REALISTIC, DOESN'T IT?
HOW IS THAT REALITY?!
grip
I DO BEG YOUR PARDON, YOUR MAJESTY! IT'S JUST SUCH AN AMUSING DREAM...
...I JUST...
IT WASN'T A DREAM— IT WAS A NIGHT-MARE!
Is it that funny?
PBFF
HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA
LADY SHUREI IS OF A MARRIAGE-ABLE AGE.
IT WOULDN'T BE ODD IN THE LEAST TO HEAR SHE WAS GETTING MARRIED.
Even if it wasn't to Seiran.
WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TOLD THEM.

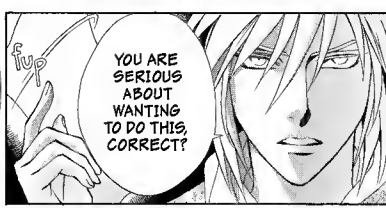
THOUGH I IMAGINE THAT STATEMENT WOULD BE QUALIFIED IN THE MINDS OF MOST WITH "THAT IS, IF SHE DIDN'T ALREADY HAVE SEIRAN."
SHE'S CHEERFUL AND ENERGETIC, WORKS HARD, HAS A PRETTY FACE— I CAN ALMOST GUARANTEE SHE'D BE A WILDLY POPULAR CHOICE OF WIFE AMONG THE YOUNG MEN IN TOWN!
YOU THINK SO...?
OH? WHAT'S THE MOST RECENT GIFT?
B-BUT WE'VE BEEN WRITING HER FAITHFULLY AND SENDING LOTS OF PRESENTS TOO, JUST LIKE YOU SUGGESTED...
Wildly popular...
BUT PERHAPS I'LL SPARE HIM THAT.
...
A STRAW DOLL!

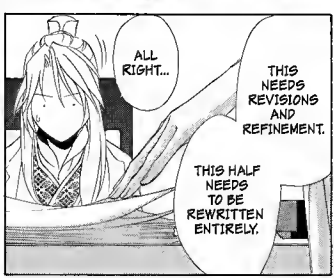
IF YOU PLACE A FEW STRANDS OF YOUR OWN HAIR IN THE BELLY OF A HANDMADE STRAW DOLL, THEN SPEND THREE NIGHTS DANCING WILDLY ABOUT IT TO INSTILL IT WITH YOUR WILL, IT IS SAID YOUR EMOTIONS SHALL REACH THE RECIPIENT.
LORD ADVISOR SHO TAUGHT US A MAGIC CHARM THAT IS WIDELY USED IN THE ISLAND NATIONS TO THE EAST, IT SEEMS.
...
pbft
pbft
TO SAY HE'S NAÏVE IS JUST A NICE WAY OF SAYING HE'S A GULLIBLE IDIOT.
ISN'T THAT SUPPOSED TO BE FOR A CURSE?
You danced around it for three nights...?
YOUR HIGHNESS HAS CERTAINLY BEEN MAKING A GREAT EFFORT...
BUT YOU HAVE NOT RECEIVED A SINGLE REPLY?
W-WELL... NO...
WITH THIS, WE'RE SURE OUR FEELINGS OF PASSION WILL FINALLY REACH SHURE!!
thok
thok
thok
thok
LEARN TO BE A LITTLE LESS TRUSTING, YOU FOOL!


IT'S ALREADY BEEN TWO MONTHS AND NOT A SINGLE LETTER...
PERHAPS SIGNING THE LETTERS "ANONYMOUS" WAS A BAD IDEA.
THAT MUST BE IT! SHE MUST NOT HAVE KNOWN TO WHOM TO SEND A REPLY!
AS THOUGH THAT WERE EVEN A POSSIBILITY...
YES, WELL... IN ANY CASE, IF THINGS CONTINUE GOING AS THEY ARE, I BELIEVE YOUR HIGHNESS HAS A VERY LONG AND DIFFICULT PATH AHEAD.
WE... ARE AWARE OF THAT.
THAT'S WHY, FOR SHUREI'S SAKE, WE...


YOUR MAJESTY...
YES?
KOYU, HERE'S WHAT I'VE COMPLETED OF THE PROPOSAL FOR TODAY.


FLUP
THIS BIT GOES OFF ON A TANGENT.
FLUP
THIS PARAGRAPH NEEDS A STRONGER FOUNDATION.
FLUP
THIS ONE IS JUST BABBLE.


flup
YOU ARE SERIOUS ABOUT WANTING TO DO THIS, CORRECT?


ALL RIGHT...
THIS NEEDS REVISIONS AND REFINEMENT.
THIS HALF NEEDS TO BE REWRITTEN ENTIRELY.

Mu. mu...
SEEING THEM THIS WAY, ONE WOULDN'T KNOW WHO IS THE RULER AND WHO IS THE SUBJECT.
YES.
PLEASE HAVE ALL THE SECTIONS I POINTED OUT REVISED BY TOMORROW.
AND THAT'S ABOUT IT...
WITH ARGUMENTS LIKE THESE, YOU WON'T HAVE THE SLIMMEST CHANCE OF WINNING OVER THE LIKES OF THE MINISTER OF THE TREASURY!
LET ME GIVE YOU ONE WORD OF WARNING, YOUR MAJESTY— WE ARE STILL A VERY LONG WAY FROM HAVING ANY HOPE OF SUCCEEDING IN THIS.
IF YOU TRULY WANT TO PRESENT THIS PROPOSAL TO THE COURT BEFORE YEAR'S END, YOU WILL NEED— AT THE VERY LEAST— THE WHOLEHEARTED BACKING OF BOTH MY BOSS AND MINISTER KO.

MINISTER KO...
YES. HE WON'T BE AN EASY ONE TO CONVINCE.
THAT SAID, YOUR MAJESTY...
HM?
I TRULY BELIEVE YOU WILL MAKE THIS HAPPEN.
INDEED.

YOUR HIGHNESS, WE MUST BEG YOU TO EXCUSE US NOW.
YES. GOOD WORK TODAY.
WE SHALL REMAIN HERE A BIT LONGER TO BEGIN THE REVISIONS AS DISCUSSED.
Go on ahead.
I DO FEEL A BIT GUILTY LEAVING HIM BEHIND LIKE THIS.
HE HAS HIS STATION AS EMPEROR TO CONSIDER.
IT CAN'T BE HELPED.
WE'RE AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE RIGHT NOW.
HE WON'T BE ABLE TO MAKE PROGRESS IF HE'S DISTRACTED BY HER BEING BEFORE HIS EYES.
SO SEVERE!
SEIRAN!

AH, THAT'S RIGHT. YOU'RE JOINING US FOR DINNER TODAY, AREN'T YOU?
ARE YOU HEADING HOME? MIND IF WE WALK WITH YOU?
GENERAL RAN, MASTER KOYU.
HAS LADY SHUREI ALREADY BEGUN PREPARING DINNER SO EARLY?
MY LADY?
WE HAVE A GUEST?

GOMP
GOMP
GOMP
WELCOME HOME, SEIRAN.
WHO...?
OH? UM...
He's filthy
A thoroughly untrustworthy individual...
Oh.
YOU ALREADY HAVE A GUEST?

GENERAL RAN.
MASTER KOYU.
EXCUSE ME FOR NOT COMING OUT TO GREET YOU.
WE MANAGED TO GET OUR HANDS ON A GOOD CHICKEN TODAY.
The meal last time was delicious.
SOUA
WK-
OH!
FW UP
FW UP
AH! WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO IT ALL OF A SUDDEN?
KROO

KROOO
FLAP
THE ROOSTER...
...FLEW?
WAP

YOU JUST DON'T KNOW WHEN TO GIVE UP, DO YOU, BIRD?

WHO ARE YOU?
A LONG STAFF!
HE'S A SKILLED FIGHTER.
THAT MOVE...
EH?
VEEN
VEEN
VEEN
AREN'T YOU...
!
..."LITTLE CYCLONE"?

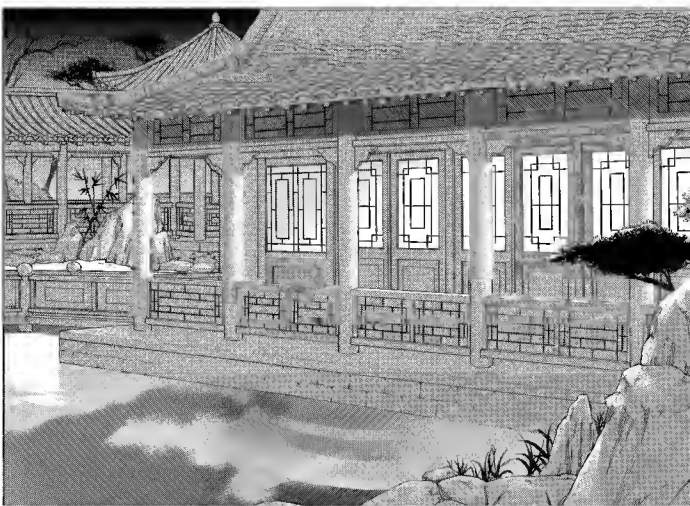
GRAB
BAM
TOSS
SEIRAN?
WHOA!
YUP!
SO I WAS RIGHT. IT'S BEEN AGES SINCE I LAST SAW YOU!
OW!!
THAT SCAR...
AND THE WAY HE HANDLED HIS STAFF...
WHY ARE YOU HERE?
TRULY A WILD COINCIDENCE. I'M HERE IN KIYO ON SOME BUSINESS.
YOU... THERE'S NO MISTAKING IT. YOU'RE ENSEI, AREN'T YOU?

BUT TO THINK THAT AFTER DAYS WITHOUT EATING, MY STRENGTH WOULD FINALLY GIVE OUT RIGHT HERE, OF ALL PLACES...
AND THAT, WHEN I CAST AROUND FOR SOME NICE HOUSE THAT LOOKED LIKE IT MIGHT FEED A POOR, STARVING SOUL AND—MORE IMPORTANTLY—DIDN'T HAVE ANY GUARDS POSTED AT THE GATE, I HAPPENED TO COME UPON THIS ONE. ONE DEAD FAINT LATER AND HERE I AM!
THAT SWEET, KIND, GRACIOUS LADY TOOK ME IN AND FED ME!
WHAT A WONDERFUL GIRL...!
TURN RIGHT AROUND AND GET OUT NOW.
GO FIND SOME OTHER HOUSE TO FAINT IN FRONT OF.
AW, THAT'S MEAN! BEING SO COLD TO AN OLD FRIEND...
SEIRAN?
AND I COULDN'T CARE LESS. OUT!
IS SOMETHING WRONG? YOU RAN OUT SO SUDDENLY—
MY LADY, YOU WERE TOO CARELESS BRINGING SUCH A PERSON INTO THE HOUSE, REGARDLESS OF HOW WRETCHEDLY COLLAPSED HE WAS.
BUT HE SAID HE WAS SO HUNGRY THAT HE WAS ON DEATH'S VERY DOORSTEP, SO...
NOT AT ALL, MY LADY. NOTHING IS WRONG.
SMILE

HA HA HA HA HA
OH, HE'S IN NO DANGER OF DYING, MY LADY! I GUARANTEE IT.
NOW SHALL I GO TOSS HIM OUT WITHOUT A MOMENT'S DELAY?
NOT A SINGLE MOMENT!
ISN'T HE A FRIEND OF YOURS?
Seiran, you seem a little different from usual somehow...
NO—
OF COURSE I AM!
AND IN A DIVINELY WONDROUS TWIST OF FATE, OLD FRIENDS MEET AGAIN!
ISN'T THAT RIGHT? UH...
...SEIRAN.
EXACTLY! IF YOU'RE A FRIEND OF SEIRAN'S, YOU ARE VERY WELCOME HERE.
YOU'RE CERTAINLY FORTUNATE—TONIGHT IS ONE OF OUR SPECIAL FEASTS. WE ONLY HAVE THEM ONCE EVERY FOUR DAYS.
IN FACT, I'D BETTER GET STARTED COOKING.
I SURE AM GLAD I WAS FOUND WHEN I WAS! ♡

SOMEONE GAVE YOU A NICE NAME.
"SEIRAN," EH?
I'M GLAD YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE HAPPY HERE.
ENSEI... YOU ARE SUCH A...
THE LITTLE LADY'S COOKING IS TASTY— NO COMPLAINTS THERE. I'M PRETTY ENVIOUS, IN FACT.
AS I DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY TO PAY FOR THE MEAL, MAYBE I SHOULD OFFER UP AN OLD STORY ABOUT YOU AS THANKS, EH?
BAM

YOU LET ONE WORD SLIP ABOUT THE PAST...
...AND I'LL SLICE YOUR HEAD OFF BEFORE YOU CAN SO MUCH AS BLINK!
JUST A JOKE, OLD FRIEND. JUST A JOKE.



WOW! THIS REALLY IS A FEAST! ♡
IT'S ALL THANKS TO THE EXCELLENT FOODSTUFFS GENERAL RAN AND MASTER KOYU BROUGHT ALONG FOR US.
ENSEI, WASN'T IT?
SO WHAT BRINGS YOU TO KIYO?
INGREDIENTS ONLY SHINE AS BRIGHT AS THEIR CHEF'S SKILL, MY LADY.
Um...
TH-THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

IF IT'S SOMEONE OF A HIGHER STATION YOU'RE SEEKING, THESE TWO GENTLEMEN COULD LIKELY BE OF HELP.
THEY ARE HIGH-RANKING OFFICIALS WHO DIRECTLY SERVE THE EMPEROR.
MY LORD, I CAME TO SEE SOMEONE.
AS THIS PERSON IS A BIT DIFFICULT TO CATCH, I WAS PLANNING ON STAYING FOR A WHILE IN THE AREA.
EH? SO YOUNG AND ALREADY SERVING AT THE EMPEROR'S SIDE... IMPRESSIVE.
SO WHAT'S OUR CURRENT EMPEROR LIKE, ANYHOW?
A SILLY 10-YEAR-OLD WITH NO SENSE OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY WHATSOEVER.
I SEE...
WELL, TRUE ENOUGH, BUT I THINK WITH SOME PROPER GUIDANCE HE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BECOME A WORTHY RULER IN THE FUTURE.
WELL, IF I'M UNABLE TO COMPLETE MY TASK, PERHAPS I WILL ASK YOU FINE MASTERS FOR YOUR HELP.
IT'S JUST THAT MY ERRAND IS A BIT ON THE SENSITIVE SIDE, SO...

THEY WERE KICKING UP A LIVELY FUSS ALL ALONG THE WAY, ALL RIGHT.
IT LOOKS LIKE SOME HAVE EVEN STARTED VENTURING HERE INTO SHI PROVINCE NOW.
YOU'RE ASKING HOW BAD THE BANDITS AND ROBBERS WERE, RIGHT?
THE ROAD..?
THAT REMINDS ME, ENSEI, YOU MENTIONED YOU CAME FROM SA PROVINCE. HOW WAS THE ROAD TO THE CAPITAL?
WE'VE BEEN RECEIVING REPORTS LATELY OF A LARGE INFLUX OF MOUNTAIN BANDITS FROM SA PROVINCE.
HUH? WHAT REQUEST?
SO IT'S AS WE FEARED.
SINCE THEY'VE SPREAD AS FAR AS KIYO NOW, A PORTION OF THE YULIN GUARD HAS BEEN ASSIGNED TO PATROL THE CITY TO DISPATCH THE BANDITS.
I WAS HOPING TO HAVE SEIRAN PARTICIPATE IN THE HUNT AS WELL.
DIS-PATCHING BANDITS?!
IN THAT CASE, I'D REALLY LIKE YOU TO TAKE ME UP ON MY REQUEST, SEIRAN.

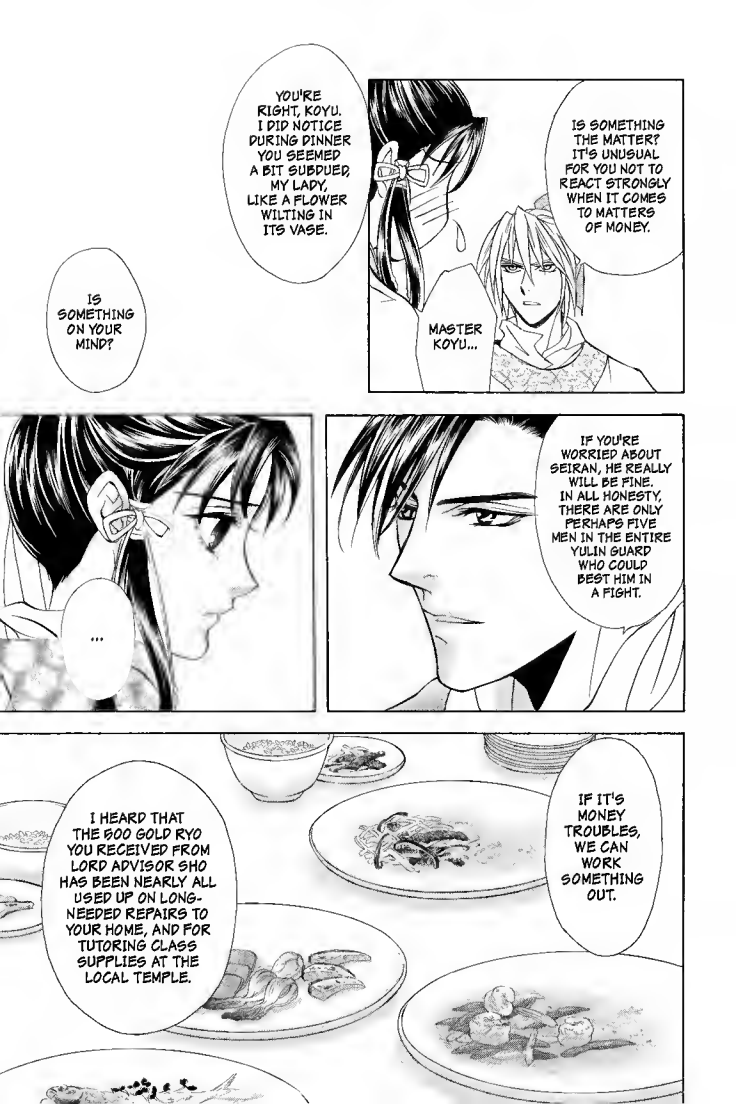
LORD SHUEI, ISN'T THE YULIN GUARD CHARGED WITH THE PROTECTION OF THE COURT? WHY WOULD YOU PATROL THE CITY STREETS BEYOND THE PALACE AS WELL?
I'M SURE YOU'RE AWARE OF THIS, MASTER SHOKA, BUT DUE TO THIS EXTREME BOUT OF HEAT WE'VE BEEN HAVING, THE COURT OFFICIALS HAVE BEEN TAKING ILL ONE AFTER THE OTHER. AS A RESULT, THE PALACE IS LARGELY DESERTED AT THE MOMENT AND THE NUMBER OF GUARDS ASSIGNED TO PROTECT IT HAS BEEN GREATLY DECREASED, LEAVING A LARGE PORTION OF SOLDIERS WITHOUT WORK.
RATHER THAN LET ALL THAT EXCESS MANPOWER GO TO WASTE, WE'VE REASSIGNED SOME OF THEM TO HELP WITH STREET PATROLS OUTSIDE THE PALACE.
BUT WHY DO YOU WANT SEIRAN? HE'S GONE BACK TO BEING JUST A REGULAR GUARD AT THE IMPERIAL GRANARY, HASN'T HE?
YES, WELL... OUR TWO HIGH GENERALS INSISTED THAT WE HAVE SEIRAN JOIN US. IT SEEMS THEY'RE BOTH QUITE TAKEN WITH HIS ABILITIES.
SEIRAN'S SWORDSMANSHIP IS WONDERFULLY RELIABLE IN BATTLE. BUT THE ASSIGNMENT IS ONLY TEMPORARY, SO I'M SURE WE'LL SEND HIM BACK TO HIS REGULAR POST SOON ENOUGH...

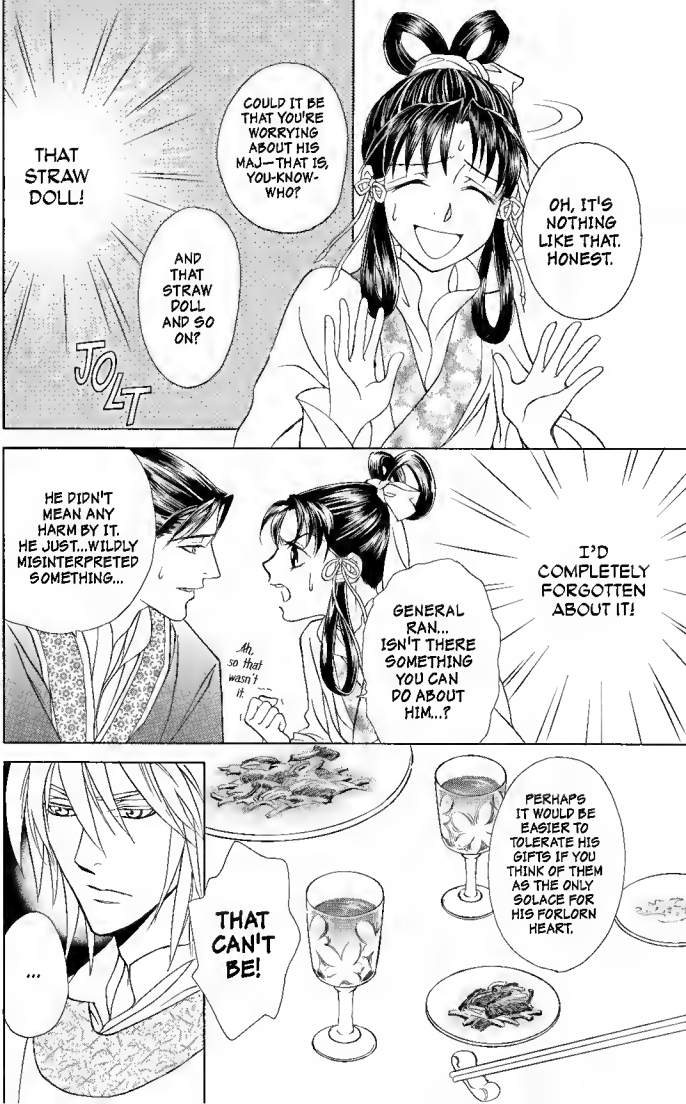
HUH?
GENERAL RAN, HOW WOULD YOU FEEL ABOUT USING THIS GUY INSTEAD OF ME?
BUT...
WHOA, HOLD ON A SECOND! I HAVE MY OWN BUSINESS TO TAKE CARE OF TOO!
FEEL FREE TO RUN HIM AS RAGGED AS YOU LIKE.
HIS FIGHTING ABILITY WILL STAND UP TO ALMOST ANYTHING AS HE HAS A NEARLY BOTTOMLESS WELL OF STAMINA. HE ALSO LACKS ANY SHRED OF DELICACY AND CAN PUT UP WITH THIS HEAT.
SEI-RAN...
I SEE... VERY WELL, THEN.
Unfortunately for you.
EVEN IF HE WERE TO JOIN US, I DOUBT THE HIGH GENERALS WOULD END THEIR CAMPAIGN TO HAVE YOU JOIN US TOO.

FIVE GOLD—?!
koff
AND WE'LL BE RECEIVING A HEFTY, SPECIAL PAY RATE OF FIVE GOLD RYO PER DAY FOR MY SERVICES.
AND IF THE FIGHTING EVER GETS TOO SEVERE, I WILL BE SURE TO USE SOMEONE NEAR ME AS A HUMAN SHIELD, OR I WILL PERHAPS SIMPLY FLEE THE BATTLE.
YOU NEEDN'T FEAR, MY LADY. I WON'T BE GONE ENTIRELY DURING THIS MONTH OF SERVICE. AT THE VERY LEAST I WILL MAKE SURE TO RETURN IN TIME FOR DINNER EVERY EVENING.
SPEAKING OF WHICH, THE GALES WILL PROBABLY PICK UP SOON, WON'T THEY?
ESPECIALLY AS IT'S NOW HIGH SUMMER.
YES. AND I BELIEVE I TOLD YOU AT THE TIME THAT I MIGHT ADJUST THE RATE ACCORDING TO THE LENGTH AND REQUIREMENTS OF THE JOB, DIDN'T I?
SEIRAN, THAT'S TWENTY TIMES THE WAGE I OFFERED YOU, ISN'T IT?
IT'S RIDICULOUS, BUT IT ACTUALLY DOES HAPPEN EVERY YEAR.
THERE'S A GOOD CHANCE THE NEW ROOF TILES WILL BE BLOWN AWAY AND NEED TO BE REPLACED ALL OVER AGAIN. WE'LL PROBABLY BE IN NEED OF THE EXTRA MONEY TO PAY FOR THE REPAIRS.
HOW IS THAT CONNECTED TO IT BEING SUMMER?

SEIRAN...
THANK YOU.
ALL RIGHT. I'LL TALK TO MY SUPERIORS ABOUT YOUR WAGE REQUEST.
HUH?
MY LADY, I WILL LEAVE ENSEI HERE TO HELP OUT IN MY PLACE.
Me?
YOU CAN HANDLE ONE MEASLY MONTH, I'M SURE. ANY COMPLAINTS?
NONE AT ALL. IN FACT, I WAS JUST WONDERING HOW TO GO ABOUT ASKING IF I COULD STAY HERE WHILE I WAS IN TOWN.
MY LORD..
I REALIZE THIS MAN HAS EVERY APPEARANCE OF BEING A DISREPUTABLE TRAMP, BUT I CAN GUARANTEE THAT HE'S HUMAN AT LEAST. AND I DO BELIEVE HE CAN BE OF USE TO YOU.
WELL, IF YOU SAY THAT MUCH OF HIM, I SHALL TRUST IN HIM AS WELL.
YOU ARE WELCOME TO STAY HERE FOR AS LONG AS IT TAKES YOU TO COMPLETE YOUR ERRAND.
BOW
THANK YOU VERY MUCH!

YOU CAN REST ASSURED AS WELL, MY LADY.
SINCE GENERAL RAN HERE HAS FORCED ME INTO HIS SERVICE AGAINST MY WILL, HE WILL BE PAYING FOR ANY EXTRA EXPENSES YOU INCUR DURING ENSEI'S STAY.
SO NO MATTER HOW MUCH HE EATS, IT SHOULDN'T AFFECT OUR HOUSEHOLD EXPENDITURES IN THE LEAST.
!
YOU WILL, GENERAL RAN? REALLY?
You are too kind.
UM... NO, UH...
IT WILL BE OF GREAT HELP TO US. ♡
I'M FINE, THANK YOU.
Would you like seconds?
IMPRESSIVELY DONE, GETTING SHUEI INTO A CORNER LIKE THAT.
THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT OUR DEWY-EYED EMPEROR LACKS—THE ABILITY TO MANIPULATE PEOPLE.
BUT...


YOU'RE RIGHT, KOYU. I DID NOTICE DURING DINNER YOU SEEMED A BIT SUBDUED, MY LADY, LIKE A FLOWER WILTING IN ITS VASE.
IS SOMETHING THE MATTER? IT'S UNUSUAL FOR YOU NOT TO REACT STRONGLY WHEN IT COMES TO MATTERS OF MONEY.
MASTER KOYU...
IS SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND?
...
IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT SEIRAN, HE REALLY WILL BE FINE. IN ALL HONESTY, THERE ARE ONLY PERHAPS FIVE MEN IN THE ENTIRE YULIN GUARD WHO COULD BEST HIM IN A FIGHT.
I HEARD THAT THE 500 GOLD RYO YOU RECEIVED FROM LORD ADVISOR SHO HAS BEEN NEARLY ALL USED UP ON LONG-NEEDED REPAIRS TO YOUR HOME, AND FOR TUTORING CLASS SUPPLIES AT THE LOCAL TEMPLE.
IF IT'S MONEY TROUBLES, WE CAN WORK SOMETHING OUT.


THAT STRAW DOLL!
COULD IT BE THAT YOU'RE WORRYING ABOUT HIS MAJ—THAT IS, YOU-KNOW-WHO?
AND THAT STRAW DOLL AND SO ON?
JOLT
OH, IT'S NOTHING LIKE THAT. HONEST.
HE DIDN'T MEAN ANY HARM BY IT. HE JUST...WILDLY MISINTERPRETED SOMETHING...
Ah, so that wasn't it.
GENERAL RAN... ISN'T THERE SOMETHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT HIM...?
I'D COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN ABOUT IT!
...
THAT CAN'T BE!
PERHAPS IT WOULD BE EASIER TO TOLERATE HIS GIFTS IF YOU THINK OF THEM AS THE ONLY SOLACE FOR HIS FORLORN HEART.

SHUREI.
YES, MASTER KOYU? DID YOU WANT SECONDS?
PERHAPS ONE MORE BOWL THEN.
CERTAINLY.
THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE I WANTED TO ASK OF YOU.
WHAT IS IT?
WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN WORKING IN THE PALACE FOR ABOUT A MONTH?
NOT IN THE INNER COURT THIS TIME, BUT IN THE OUTER PALACE ITSELF.

THE OUTER PALACE...
I...
I'LL DO IT! I WOULD LOVE TO DO IT!!

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

The heads of the four departments and six ministries sit in a row. Court is in session.
Vice Minister of the Treasury, Yuri Kei, makes an appeal.
YOUR MAJESTY, HONORED MINISTERS... AS YOU ARE ALL AWARE, THE SUMMER THIS YEAR HAS BROUGHT WITH IT A TERRIBLE HEAT WAVE...
ｳﾘｰ
IN PARTICULAR, THE MINISTRY OF THE TREASURY IS IN AN EXTREMELY DIRE SITUATION. WE ARE PERILOUSLY CLOSE TO A TOTAL COLLAPSE.
AS WE ARE SO UNDERSTAFFED, THOSE WHO REMAIN ARE NOW ARE COLLAPSING FROM FATIGUE, THUS DECREASING OUR AVAILABLE MANPOWER IN A VICIOUS CYCLE.
THE NUMBER OF CIVIL SERVANTS WHO HAVE BECOME INCAPACITATED BY THE HEAT AND ARE UNABLE TO WORK IS INCREASING STEADILY.
ｷﾗｷﾗ
ｷﾗｷﾗ
ｷﾗｷﾗ

HOW ABOUT THIS...
...
WE ENTREAT YOU, YOUR MAJESTY, PLEASE FIND A WAY TO EASE OUR DESPERATE SITUATION IN THE GREATEST OF HASTE...!
IF THE MINISTRY OF THE TREASURY—WHICH HANDLES ALL THE COUNTRY'S FINANCIAL AFFAIRS—BECOMES INCAPACITATED, IT WILL CAUSE FURTHER CHAOS IN ALL OTHER ADMINISTRATIVE BRANCHES.
AS THE TREASURY'S DIRE CONDITION DEMANDS THE MOST IMMEDIATE RELIEF, WE WILL TEMPORARILY FILL ITS VACANT POSTS WITH QUALIFIED CIVIL SERVANTS FROM OTHER MINISTRIES.
EH?
THIS WOULD BE A TRAGIC THING.
AFTER ALL, IF THE ACCOUNT LEDGER IS NOT KEPT, WE MAY END UP EATING BARLEY INSTEAD OF RICE AT MEALS.
But I'm too full...
EAT EVERY LAST GRAIN!

I UNDERSTAND THE SITUATION.
BUT SERVING AS AN AIDE IN THE TREASURY? ISN'T THAT TOO IMPORTANT A JOB...?
DON'T WORRY. IT'S NOT A POSITION THAT AFFECTS ACTUAL GOVERNANCE.
YOU WOULD BE DOING THINGS LIKE DISTRIBUTING DOCUMENTS TO THE VARIOUS MINISTRIES, SORTING CORRESPONDENCE, AND THE LIKE.
OH. IF IT'S ONLY THAT...
SO I'LL PROBABLY NEED TO DRESS AS A BOY...?
YES. YOU'LL HAVE TO DRESS AS A PAGE.
Women aren't allowed into the Outer Palace.
U H H H H...
DON'T WORRY. WITH YOUR FIGURE, NO ONE SHOULD BECOME SUSPICIOUS.

INSTEAD I JUST FELT SAD...
OR AT LEAST EXPRESSED MY DIS-PLEASURE...?
MAYBE I SHOULD HAVE PROTESTED THAT...
I cut my hair a little bit too.
YOU THINK SO?
OH. YOU READY, PRINCESS?
SO THIS LOOK ACTUALLY SUITS ME...?
DRESSED LIKE THAT, NO ONE COULD SEE YOU AS ANYTHING BUT A CUTE, FRESH-FACED YOUNG BOY.
Treasury Page Shu Hong

WHAT KIND OF PERSON IS THE MINISTER OF THE TREASURY?
HUH?
AND HE'S QUITE MYSTERIOUS.
HE'S ODD.
HE'S CAPABLE.
YES, WELL... IN BRIEF, I WOULD SAY...
AND HE MANAGED TO REBALANCE AND RESUSCITATE THE NATIONAL TREASURY AFTER YEARS OF CARELESS SPENDING BY HIS PREDECESSORS.
FROM THE MINUTE HE TOOK OFFICE, HE HAD COMPLETE COMMAND OF HIS SMALL MINISTRY STAFF...
HIS CAPABILITY IS LEGENDARY AND UNIVERSALLY RECOGNIZED THROUGHOUT THE COURT, ALONG WITH MY BOSS, HE'S ONE OF TWO CANDIDATES WIDELY CONSIDERED TO BE THE BEST FOR THE VACANT PRIME MINISTER POSITION.

UM... YOU SAID HE'S CALLED "KIJIN"? AS IN "STRANGE ONE"? DOES THAT MEAN HE'S A LITTLE ECCENTRIC?
YES, IT'S WELL KNOWN.
I WAS TRYING TO MAKE A JOKE...
HIS NAME IS KIJIN KO, OF THE NOBLE KO CLAN.
GENDER: MALE. AGE, FACE, VOICE: ALL UNKNOWN.
IT WOULD PROBABLY BE EASIER TO SHOW YOU THAN TO EXPLAIN.
ONCE YOU MEET HIM, YOU'LL UNDER-STAND.
HM, SEEMS LIKE THERE ARE A LOT OF INTERESTING FOLK WANDERING AROUND THE COURT.
SAY, VICE MINISTER RI...
?

I THOUGHT YOU SAID IT WOULD TAKE ONLY FIFTEEN MINUTES TO GET TO THE MINISTRY? BUT WE'VE BEEN WALKING FOR AN HOUR NOW.
AREN'T WE THERE YET?
!
I JUST THOUGHT IT WOULD BE NICE TO SHOW YOU AROUND THE OUTER PALACE A LITTLE.
WE'RE HEADING TO THE TREASURY NOW, OKAY?!
TROMP
TROMP
DIZZY
I HADN'T REALIZED...
huff
huff
huff
...JUST HOW BAD MASTER KOYU'S SENSE OF DIRECTION IS...
AND HE'S UNREASON-ABLY STUBBORN.

HUH?
I DON'T TOLERATE TARDINESS.
HAVE THEM GO BACK RIGHT NOW.
A MASK?
SO THIS IS KIJIN KO, THE MINISTER OF THE TREASURY!

SO AFTER THAT YOU MANAGED TO GET LADY SHUREI ACCEPTED INTO THE TREASURY?
sigh
HE CERTAINLY IS A STRANGE ONE, ALL RIGHT...
HOW DID IT GO?
APPARENTLY SHE BUCKLED DOWN IMMEDIATELY AND WORKED HARD FOR THE REST OF THE AFTERNOON, NEVER UTTERING ONE SINGLE WORD OF COMPLAINT. THAT'S WHAT VICE MINISTER KEI TOLD ME WHEN HE CAME OVER TO THANK ME PROFUSELY.
AS FOR ENSEI— WHO GOT ROPED IN ALONG WITH SHUREI— IT SEEMS THEY ARE MAKING GOOD USE OF HIM AS WELL.
VEEN
I HAVE TO HAND IT TO YOU, KOYU. THIS WAS A BRILLIANT LITTLE IDEA OF YOURS.
PLANTING LADY SHUREI IN THE SHORT-STAFFED TREASURY...
...AS AN AIDE TO MINISTER KO, OF ALL PEOPLE...

ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT. IT WAS JUST A THOUGHT.
DON'T SAY IT LIKE THAT. IN ANY CASE, SHUREI WOULDN'T WANT TO GET CAUGHT UP IN SOMETHING MESSY.
A STUDENT... RIGHT.
I still oversee her studies now and then, don't I?
SEEING THE WAY YOU TREAT LADY SHUREI, I COULD FORGET YOU'RE A SELF-PROCLAIMED WOMAN-HATER.
IT'S BECAUSE I DON'T THINK OF HER AS A WOMAN. SHE IS MY STUDENT.
FIRST SHE STOOD IN AS THE EMPEROR'S NOBLE CONSORT, AND NOW SHE'S PLAYING THE ROLE OF A MINISTRY PAGE.
LADY SHUREI'S LIFE IS CERTAINLY REPLETE WITH A WIDE RANGE OF EXPERIENCES, ISN'T IT?

NEXT I'LL NEED YOU TO SORT THESE DOCUMENTS BY DATE.
I'LL NEED THESE TEN SCROLLS PULLED FROM THE STACKS AND BROUGHT TO MY DESK STRAIGHT AWAY. ALSO THROW OUT ALL THE PAPERS STACKED OVER THERE.
STRAIGHTEN UP THOSE THREE SHELVES AS WELL.
AFTERWARDS GO TO THE ARCHIVES TO CHECK OUT THESE THREE BOOKS AND RETURN THOSE FIVE THERE.
WHILE YOU'RE OUT, TAKE THESE DOCUMENTS TO THE OFFICE OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND RELAY THIS MESSAGE TO THE SECRETARY—
"RECEIVING SUCH A PREPOSTEROUS BUDGET PROPOSAL FROM YOU GIVES ME PAUSE TO WONDER IF YOUR BRAIN ISN'T ALREADY ROTTEN THROUGH, YOU BOORISH CHURL." ...THAT'S IT. MAKE SURE TO REPEAT IT TO HIM WORD FOR WORD.
YES SIR.
THAT IS ALL.
flup

SHU...
Will you be all right?
I'M FINE.
IT'S BEEN TEN DAYS SINCE I'VE STARTED WORKING AT THE MINISTRY. A LITTLE LIST OF TASKS LIKE THAT ISN'T GOING TO PHASE ME!
ALL RIGHT, HERE I GO!
THE MINISTER'S MANNER WITH HIS SUBORDINATES IS DEFINITELY THE STRICTEST OF ANY BOSS I'VE EVER WORKED FOR.
Without a doubt.
BOTH NEWCOMERS AND VETERANS ALIKE WORK NONSTOP.
BUT HE DOES MANAGE THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORKLOAD AMAZINGLY WELL.
ANY TASK HE GIVES ME THAT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE AT FIRST ACTUALLY ENDS UP BEING DOABLE WHEN I GIVE IT MY BEST EFFORT.
HE'S ABLE TO QUANTIFY A PERSON'S ABILITY AND DETERMINE PRECISELY HOW MUCH HE IS CAPABLE OF DOING.
It's almost scary...

I'M HEADING OUT TO THE ARCHIVES AND THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS OFFICE!
I GUESS THIS IS FINE FOR NEWCOMERS AND PAGES, BUT...
...I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF HIGHER RANKING CIVIL SERVANTS WITH MORE PRIDE ENDED UP QUITTING THIS MINISTRY QUICKLY.
NOT TO MENTION THEY'D PROBABLY HATE TAKING ORDERS FROM A MAN IN A MASK.
ENSEI!
IT'S TRUE ONE CAN'T DISCERN HIS AGE OR FACE.
NOT WITH THAT MASK ON.
IT SEEMS MINISTER KO NEVER TAKES IT OFF IN THE PRESENCE OF OTHER PEOPLE.

I KNOW THERE ARE THINGS ONE REALLY SHOULDN'T ASK, BUT... WHY DOES HE WEAR THAT MASK?
I HEARD HE GOT DUMPED BY HIS WOMAN BECAUSE OF HIS FACE.
WHAT?!
IT'S ONLY TALK, OF COURSE, BUT HE'S STILL SINGLE, RIGHT?
BUT THAT'S TOO SAD!
YOUR FACE IS SOMETHING YOU CAN'T CHANGE. EVEN A SUPERFICIAL WOMAN SHOULD KNOW THAT'S GOING TOO FAR!
MINISTER KO MAY HAVE A BRUSQUE WAY WITH PEOPLE, BUT I DON'T THINK HE'S REALLY A BAD PERSON UNDERNEATH.
HE COULD PROVIDE VERY WELL FOR A WIFE CONSIDERING HOW SMART, EMINENT AND RICH HE IS!
THAT LAST ONE IS THE REAL CLINCHER IN YOUR OPINION, ISN'T IT?
MONEY IS VERY IMPOR-TANT!
Ha ha ha
WELL, YOU SURE ARE WORKING HARD HERE, PRINCESS. ARE YOU ENJOYING IT?
DEFINITELY! HOW ABOUT YOU, ENSEI? YOU DON'T SEEM AT ALL UNHAPPY ABOUT BEING HERE EITHER.

The Imperial Civil Exam is taken by those who wish to work in the country's central administration.
The Provincial Exam is for those who wish to work in the smaller, local offices that govern each province.
HM... MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE I ONCE STUDIED TO TAKE THE PROVINCIAL EXAM IN THE PAST.
YOU WANTED TO BECOME A PROVINCIAL BUREAUCRAT? OR A CIVIL SERVANT?
YEAH, SORT OF.
BUT YOU GAVE UP?
WELL, SOME THINGS CAME UP AND.. YEAH.
YOU COULD STILL TAKE THE EXAM NOW, YOU KNOW.
TRUE ENOUGH. I WAS THINKING THAT EXACT THING! MAYBE I SHOULD START STUDYING WITH YOU, PRINCESS.
Ahh...
I'LL HAVE TO WARN YOU THAT MASTER KOYU IS A PRETTY STRICT TEACHER. AND HE GIVES OUT CARTLOADS OF HOMEWORK.
SO THAT'S WHY I ALWAYS SEE THE LAMPS LIT IN YOUR ROOM LATE INTO THE NIGHT.

SEIRAN...
I HOPE HE COMES HOME SAFE AGAIN TODAY.
WELL, I'M ON ORDERS FROM SEIRAN TO ACT AS YOUR BODY-GUARD WHILE HE'S AWAY, AFTER ALL!
I THINK HE ONLY MEANT DURING THE DAY-TIME...
HUH?
GRIN
OH, NOTHING.
WHAT?
IF I KNOW SEIRAN, HE'LL BE JUST FINE.
THAT'S A RELIEF SOMEHOW.
I'M JUST HAPPY THAT SEIRAN HAS A FRIEND LIKE YOU.

LORD ADVISOR SOU, HIGH GENERAL HAKU! THIS WAY, PLEASE!
THESE THREE ARE ALSO FUGITIVES FROM SA PROVINCE.
TH OK
AGAIN?!
Mmph!
UNBE-LIEVABLE!
WHO IS IT THAT KEEPS GETTING IN THE WAY OF OUR SPORT?!
YES, WHO?! WHO KEEPS RUNNING OFF AHEAD AND TRUSSING UP THESE BLOODY BANDITS AS THOUGH WE COULDN'T HANDLE THEM OURSELVES?!
THIS IS DOWNRIGHT INSUBOR-DINATION!
I KNEW I SHOULD'VE PUSHED THIS RIDICULOUS JOB ON ENSEI.
I SHOULD HAVE JUST STAYED BY MY LADY'S SIDE.
He would certainly have suited them better...
Hey, tell me who caught you!
FWIP
...
AFTER I GOT ALL FIRED UP THINKING I WOULD HAVE A GOOD BRAWL!

RHM RHM
RHM
LOOKS LIKE WE'RE IN FOR A STORM.
MY LADY...
GET OVER HERE OR I'LL FORCE YOU INTO THE YULIN RIGHT GUARD MYSELF!
SWP
tmp
tmp
tmp
I'M COMING!
plip
SEI-RAN!
plip
plip
KR
KR
WHAT'RE YOU STANDING THERE DAY-DREAMING FOR? YOU WANT THE GOD OF THUNDER TO STRIKE YOU DEAD?
HIGH GENERAL HAKU..
HEY, SEIRAN, COME DRINK THE NIGHT AWAY WITH ME JUST THIS ONCE.
Aw, you don't act cute at all.
IF YOU DO, I GUARANTEE YOU'LL BE DYING TO JOIN MY UNIT THE VERY NEXT DAY!
SORRY, I HAVE OTHER PLANS.

WAIT! YOU'RE NOT ALREADY IN THE LEFT GUARD, ARE YOU?!
DO YOU KNOW HOW BORING IT WOULD BE SERVING UNDER YOSEI, ALWAYS WONDERING IF YOU'LL ACTUALLY HEAR HIM UTTER A SINGLE WORD THIS YEAR?!
If you were in my unit, you would never be bored!
High General Yosei Koku, Yulin Left Guard
High General Raien Haku, Yulin Right Guard
For generations the Haku and Koku noble clans have turned out a prestigious string of military generals.
As a result, a passionate rivalry sprang up between the two houses.
And so it is with the two High Generals, who are as opposite in manner and temperament as conceivably possible.
Despite that, underneath they seem to share very much the same personality traits.
THEY BOTH APPARENTLY HAVE NO PROBLEM BEING A NUISANCE TO OTHERS...

PLEASE DO IGNORE IT. I AM HAPPY WHERE I AM.
YEAH? WELL, DO YA THINK I CAN JUST IGNORE STRENGTH LIKE YOURS BEING BURIED IN SOME DINKY GRANARY GUARD JOB?
WHETHER IT'S THE YULIN LEFT GUARD OR THE RIGHT, I HAVE NO INTENTION OF JOINING EITHER ONE!
ZAAAA
RUMBLE
MUCH HAPPIER THAN I EVER WAS IN THE PAST.
RHHM RHHM
HUH?
HIGH GENERAL HAKU...
GEH! ARE YOU TELLING ME TO GIVE UP?
WHY DON'T YOU CONSIDER SHAVING OFF THAT BEARD?
IT REALLY DOESN'T SUIT YOU IN THE LEAST.

GROWING A BEARD DOES NOTHING TO HIDE THAT BABY FACE OF YOURS.
WHY NOT JUST ACCEPT THE TRUTH AND MOVE ON?
!!
YOU'RE THE LAST PERSON I WANT TO HEAR THAT FROM!
YOU GO AROUND TELLING BALD-FACED LIES THAT YOU'RE TWENTY-ONE!!
PLEASE REFRAIN FROM SLANDERING PEOPLE'S GOOD NAMES, GENERAL.
DOON
BUT FROM THE LOOK OF THESE STORM CLOUDS...
...I HOPE LADY SHUREI WILL BE ALL RIGHT.
GWAH!
WISH
IT'S SHU HONG. MAY I COME IN?

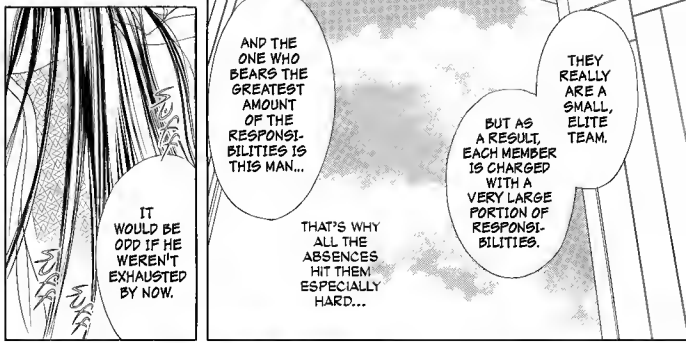
SILENCE
NO ONE IS HERE?
HUH?
MINISTER KO?
HE HASN'T COLLAPSED FROM FATIGUE, HAS HE?
SHOCK

MIN-ISTER KO!
NNNN
MIN-ISTER...
NNNN
HE'S ASLEEP?
OH... THAT REALLY SCARED ME!
I THOUGHT FOR A MOMENT THAT HE WAS DEAD.
SLUMP
FOR HIM TO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP IN A PLACE LIKE THIS...
NNNN
I GUESS IT'S NOT SURPRISING. ANY NORMAL PERSON WHO WORKS AS HARD AS HE DOES WOULD HAVE COLLAPSED LONG AGO.
NNN
NNN

MINISTER KO DOES SEVERAL TIMES THE WORK HE ASSIGNS ANY OF HIS SUBORDINATES.

ALL OF THEM KNOW IT TOO, WHICH IS WHY NO ONE EVER COMPLAINS, EVEN WHEN HE GIVES OUT A HUGE PILE OF ASSIGNMENTS.

THOSE WHO REMAIN WORKING FOR HIM ALL COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND THE WAY HE WORKS AND HAVE DECIDED TO FOLLOW HIM LOYALLY.


THEY REALLY ARE A SMALL, ELITE TEAM.
BUT AS A RESULT, EACH MEMBER IS CHARGED WITH A VERY LARGE PORTION OF RESPONSI-BILITIES.
THAT'S WHY ALL THE ABSENCES HIT THEM ESPECIALLY HARD...
AND THE ONE WHO BEARS THE GREATEST AMOUNT OF THE RESPONSI-BILITIES IS THIS MAN...
IT WOULD BE ODD IF HE WEREN'T EXHAUSTED BY NOW.

...
SUFF
I NEVER NOTICED BEFORE BECAUSE MY ATTENTION WAS ALWAYS ON HIS MASK, BUT...
GULP
...HE HAS SUCH BEAUTIFUL HAIR...
shff

OH...!
SO SOFT AND SILKY!

thp
Just a little won't hurt...♡
thp
THRILL
WHAT A WONDERFUL TEXTURE!
IT'S LIKE THE FINEST GRADE OF SILK...!
WHO IS THIS MANZ!
SUFA
?!
WHOA
?!
THIS HAIR...! IT REALLY IS ABNORMALLY SILKY! SO MUCH SO THAT IT WON'T STAY BRAIDED ON ITS OWN!!
DESPITE HAVING A FACE SO AWFUL THAT A WOMAN DUMPED HIM BECAUSE OF IT, HE WAS BLESSED WITH SUCH BEAUTIFUL HAIR.
FOR SOMEONE WITH A FACE SO INFAMOUS THAT THE ENTIRE COURT FALLS SILENT AT ITS MENTION... THIS IS ACTUALLY DOUBLY CRUEL!!
SIMULTANEOUSLY SYMPATHETIC & ENVIOUS

RHHM RHHM
AH...!
AH...
FWASH
ZAAAA
THE WIN-DOW...
I HAVE TO HURRY AND CLOSE IT...
SHK
SHK
RHHM RHHM
VRK
UM...
SHK
SHIK
WHAT IS IT?
SHU HONG?
SHAF

...!
DOOOO
EEEEK!
NOOO!

NOOO!
SHU HONG.
CALM DOWN.
I'M SCARED!
I HATE THUNDER!
VHMMM
DOOM
SEI-RAN...
SEI-RAN!
THOMP
!
FWASH
AAAAH!
C-COME NOW...
CALM YOUR-SELF.
SOB
SOB

!!
I SUPPOSE WE'LL BE STUCK HERE FOR A—
MY, THAT'S QUITE A STORM WE'RE HAVING OUT THERE, ISN'T IT?
MM?
HUH?
ENSEI?
PRIN-CESS!
HUH?
N...
ACK!

NOOO!
IT WAS THE MOST HILARIOUS THING I'VE EVER SEEN!
IT WASN'T FUNNY.
fwap
fwap
fwap
OF ALL PEOPLE IT HAD TO BE THAT TERRIFYING MINISTER KO!
WAAH
OH WHY COULDN'T IT HAVE BEEN VICE MINISTER KEI AT LEAST?

WELL, WITH HOW LOUD THE THUNDER WAS TODAY, I SUPPOSE IT COULDN'T HAVE BEEN HELPED.
HOW COULD I TELL WITH THAT MASK ON?
SOBSOB
I'M SURE ON THE INSIDE HE WAS SPEECHLESS WITH FURY!
HE DIDN'T SEEM ANGRY AFTERWARDS, DID HE?
WELL, I'M GLAD.
WHAT IS THERE TO BE GLAD ABOUT, FATHER?! THE WHOLE THING WAS A MESS!
NORMALLY WHEN THIS TIME OF YEAR ROLLS AROUND, YOU GET A BIT DEPRESSED, DON'T YOU?
IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WORKING IN THE OUTER PALACE HAS BEEN A GOOD CHANGE OF PACE FOR YOU.
I AGREE.

IT'S ALL RIGHT. I KNEW THAT FROM THE START. ONE MONTH IS FINE.
IT'S AMAZING JUST HAVING THIS MUCH!
SHU-REI...
BUT IT IS ONLY FOR ONE MONTH...
Thanks to Seiran, we have more than enough rice left over! ♡
HOW ABOUT SOME SECONDS, FATHER?
Don't you mean "thanks to General Ran"?
SURE.
HEY, PRINCESS!

I'VE BROUGHT YOU A MIDNIGHT SNACK!
ENSEI?
HERE WE ARE... REFRESH-MENTS FOR OUR TIRELESS PRINCESS!
That's...
WHAT IS THIS ALL OF A SUDDEN?
LIKE I SAID, REFRESH-MENTS!
THANK YOU. DO YOU WANT TO COME IN FOR A BIT?
KEEP ME COMPANY WHILE I EAT.
THESE RICEBALLS ARE DELICIOUS!
GLAD TO HEAR IT.
...
MUNCH

SAY, ENSEI... DO YOU THINK IT'S FOOLISH TO DREAM OF SOMETHING THAT CAN NEVER BE GRANTED?
NEVER BE GRANTED?
THERE ARE THINGS IN LIFE THAT CAN NEVER BE ACCOMPLISHED, AREN'T THERE? NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU WORK TOWARD THEM.
I SUPPOSE YOU COULD SAY THERE ARE HURDLES IN LIFE THAT ARE INSURMOUNTABLE.
DO YOU THINK IT'S FOOLISH KNOWING HOW IMPOSSIBLE YOUR DREAM IS BUT TO STILL CLING TO IT ANYWAY, UNABLE TO LET IT GO IN YOUR HEART?
PRINCESS... IS IT YOUR DREAM TO BECOME A CIVIL SERVANT?
YES. HOW DID YOU GUESS?
WELL, YOU DO SPEND EVERY NIGHT STUDYING YOUR HEART OUT LIKE THIS.
PLUS YOU LOOK SO FULL OF ENERGY WHILE YOU'RE GOING ABOUT YOUR WORK AT THE MINISTRY EVERY DAY.
YES. I REALLY ENJOY IT.
BUT IT'S NO GOOD IN THE END. NO MATTER HOW HARD I WORK, A GIRL WOULD NEVER BE ALLOWED TO TAKE THE CIVIL EXAM.

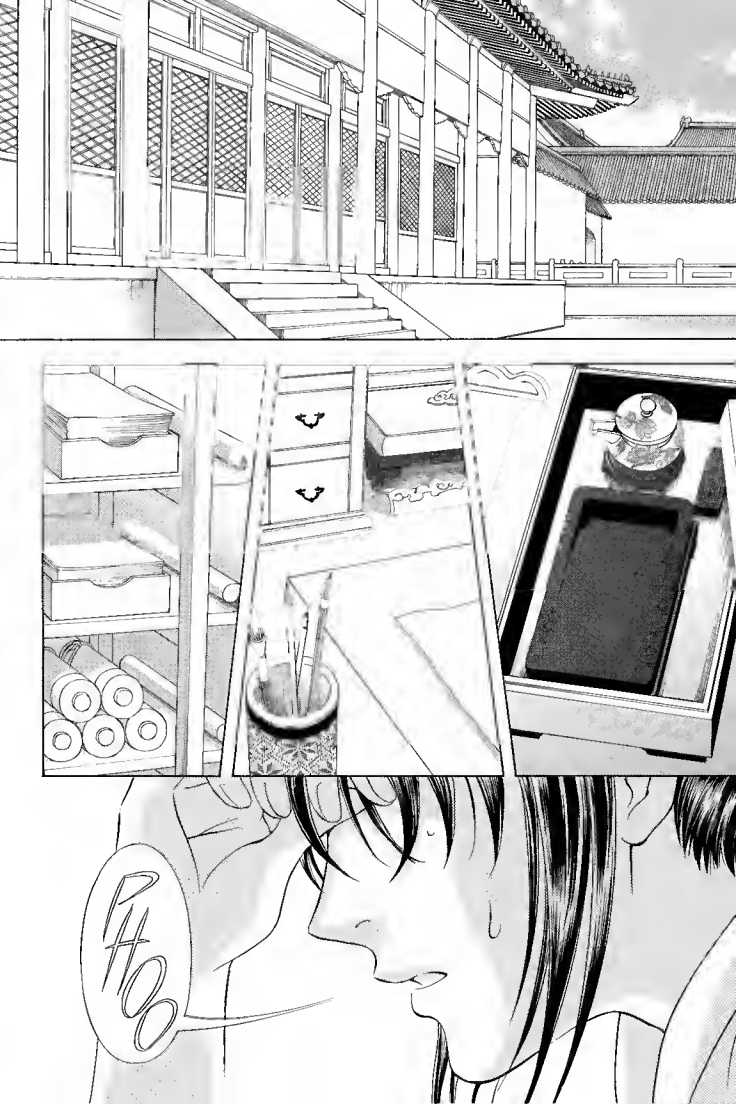
AND I WAS FINE WITH IT... UP UNTIL NOW.
IN THE PAST, I FELT FREE IN PURSUING MY DREAM, EVEN IF I COULD NEVER ENTIRELY ACHIEVE IT.
BEING ABLE TO STUDY SECRETLY TO MY HEART'S CONTENT WAS ENOUGH.
BUT NOW THAT THEY'VE COME SO CLOSE...
"THEY"?
MY DREAM AND REALITY...
FOR HALF A YEAR I'VE BEEN ABLE TO OBSERVE THE COMINGS AND GOINGS OF A VARIETY OF PEOPLE AT COURT.
WHAT WAS ONCE JUST A WHIMSICAL DAYDREAM BRUSHED SO CLOSE TO MY REALITY THAT I BEGAN TO HOPE MY HANDS MIGHT JUST REACH IT.
IT'S ABOUT TIME YOU STARTED LOOKING AROUND FOR A GOOD MAN, I THINK.
AND THEN A WOMAN DOWN THE STREET SAID SOMETHING TO ME THE OTHER DAY...
THERE'S NOTHING STRANGE ABOUT SAYING THAT KIND OF THING TO A GIRL YOUR AGE.
THAT'S RIGHT, THERE'S NOTHING STRANGE ABOUT THAT AT ALL! NOTHING STRANGE ABOUT ME BECOMING A BRIDE AND BEING WEDDED OFF TO SOMEONE!

THE TRUTH IS, MY FAMILY HAS BEEN TOO KIND TO ME.
I SHOULD ACT LIKE A PROPER MAIDEN MY AGE AND GET MARRIED.
TO LIVE MY LIFE AS A WIFE AND AS A MOTHER... THAT'S THE NORMAL THING TO DO.
EVEN THOUGH I SPEND ALL MY TIME STUDYING LIKE THIS, THEY NEVER TELL ME THAT IT'S USELESS OR TO STOP WASTING MY TIME.
THAT'S WHY I FELT IN MY HEART I COULD ALWAYS CONTINUE CHASING MY DREAMS.
BUT REALITY IS DIFFERENT, ISN'T IT?
I NEVER KNEW THAT ONCE YOU BECAME AN ADULT IT WOULD BE SO DIFFICULT TO CONTINUE FOLLOWING YOUR DREAMS.
YOU KNOW WHAT I THINK, PRINCESS? I THINK YOU CAN ONLY SAY THAT BECAUSE YOU TRULY KNOW WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO YOU IN LIFE.
BUT THINK OF IT THIS WAY— YOU CAN ONLY FEEL CONFUSED IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN ONE PATH TO CHOOSE, RIGHT?
I THINK THAT'S GREAT. YOU SHOULD STAY UNDECIDED FOR AS LONG AS YOU NEED TO.
THE KNOWING BRINGS THE HEARTACHE AND THE CONFUSION ABOUT WHAT TO DO.
DO YOU REALLY THINK IT'S ALL RIGHT FOR ME TO GO ON LIKE THIS?
MAYBE I'M JUST BEING GREEDY, WANTING IT BOTH WAYS.

NOTHING EVER COMES TO THOSE IN A HURRY. BUT THOSE WHO KNOW HOW TO WATCH AND WAIT ALWAYS GET THEIR CHANCE IN THE END.
SO UNTIL THEN, DO ALL THAT YOU CAN TO BE PREPARED AND YOU CAN'T GO WRONG.
NOW YOU'RE OVER-THINKING IT, PRINCESS!
ANYWAY, IT'S NOT AS THOUGH SOMEONE'S PROPOSED TO YOU AND YOU'VE GOT TO HURRY AND DECIDE, RIGHT?
W-WELL, THAT'S TRUE...
YOU'RE QUITE THE NATURAL ADVISOR, AREN'T YOU, ENSEI?
As natural as the air.
What?
I KNOW SEIRAN AND FATHER SENT YOU HERE.
WHAT? YOU KNEW ALL ALONG?
Yes.
THE RICEBALLS GAVE IT AWAY. FATHER'S ALWAYS HAVE AN INAPPROPRIATE AMOUNT OF SALT AND AN AWKWARD SHAPE.
SEIRAN'S ARE LARGE AND PERFECTLY ROUND, ALWAYS WITH AN EXTREMELY CONSERVATIVE AMOUNT OF SALT.
IT MUST'VE BEEN BECAUSE I SAID ODD THINGS AT DINNER.
WILL YOU PLEASE TELL THEM FOR ME THAT I'M FINE NOW?

YOU REALLY ARE A SHARP ONE, PRINCESS
THANK YOU FOR CHEERING ME UP!
YOU KNOW, I THINK YOU'RE VERY WELL SUITED TO BEING A CIVIL SERVANT.
SO I HOPE YOU WON'T GIVE UP.
Wah!
SAME TO YOU, ENSEI.
HEE
TRULY, IT'S A GIFT BEING ABLE TO LIFT PEOPLE'S MOODS LIKE THAT.
NOW TO DO MY BEST!
JUST A LITTLE...
JUST A LITTLE MORE...

Chapter 11


PHOO

THAT SHOULD DO IT!
shff
flup
tok

SHU HONG.
OH
I... I'M SORRY I STARTED READING IT WITHOUT ASKING...
I WAS JUST CHECKING TO MAKE SURE NONE OF THE DOCUMENTS TO BE DISPOSED OF GOT MIXED IN...
fomp
WHAT WERE YOU DOING?
GOOD MORNING!
M-MIN-ISTER KO!
KOXX
He's usually the first one here.
MINISTER KO ALWAYS COMES TO WORK FIRST THING IN THE MORNING.
NOW THAT I THINK ABOUT IT...
I THOUGHT HE'D BE ANGRY...
Phew
I SEE.

BOW
UM... I TRULY APOLOGIZE FOR YESTERDAY. MY BEHAVIOR WAS INAPPRO-PRIATE.
I'M SCARED!
I HATE THUNDER!
I GOT MYSELF WORKED UP...
...AND I ACTED DISGRACE-FULLY.
ENOUGH.
RATHER THAN DWELLING ON SUCH THINGS, CONCENTRATE ON YOUR WORK.
HE REALLY DOES PRIORITIZE WORK ABOVE ALL ELSE, DOESN'T HE?
YES SIR...
MINISTER KO?
AREN'T YOU... TIRED?
IT SEEMS TO ME THAT WORKING NONSTOP EVERY DAY WOULD FATIGUE YOU SO MUCH THAT IT WOULD EVENTUALLY START AFFECTING YOUR WORK.
A FEW BREAKS EVERY NOW AND THEN WOULD HELP, DON'T YOU THINK?

SIR?
I DO NOT DRINK POORLY MADE TEA, UNDERSTAND?
...
JUST ONCE A DAY THEN.
IF YOU WERE TO COLLAPSE AS WELL, MINISTER, I DON'T KNOW HOW THE TREASURY COULD POSSIBLY RUN WITHOUT YOU.
YES SIR!
Hurray!
You two are certainly early today.
Good morning, sir.
I'm done mopping the corridor.
AH, THANK YOU.
WON'T YOU HAVE SOME TEA, VICE MINISTER KEI?
Ah!
kcii
kcii
kcii

YOUR TEA, MINISTER KO.
...
OH...?
HOW IS HE GOING TO DRINK TEA WITH HIS MASK ON?
AK
K
SIP SIP SIP
THE MASK'S MOUTH OPENED...!
Or the chin came down?!
...

HUH?
SHU HONG.
I FEEL LIKE I SAW SOMETHING I SHOULDN'T HAVE...
BBMP
TO ASK ME SO SUDDENLY...
IF THE DECISION WERE YOURS, HOW WOULD YOU USE IT?
SUPPOSE THE KINGDOM HAD A SURPLUS OF FUNDS.
SIR?
HOW MUCH IS THE SURPLUS?
CONSIDER IT UNLIMITED. THIS IS A HYPOTHETICAL EXERCISE. NOW TELL ME THE FIRST THING THAT COMES TO YOUR MIND.
YES, SIR. FIRST... I WOULD CREATE A SUPPLEMENTARY INCOME FUND FOR MIDWIVES AND PREGNANT WOMEN.
EXCEPT FOR THE VERY RICH, THE MAJORITY OF HOUSEHOLDS NEED BOTH THE HUSBAND AND WIFE TO WORK TO SURVIVE.

IF WE COULD OFFER EVEN A LITTLE EXTRA INCOME, WE COULD GIVE SO MANY WOMEN A LITTLE MORE PEACE OF MIND WHEN THEY GIVE BIRTH.
NO MATTER HOW WEAKENED THEIR BODIES ARE FROM CHILDBIRTH, THE MOTHERS CAN'T AFFORD TO REST AND TRULY RECOVER.
PREGNANT WOMEN HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO CONTINUE WORKING UP TO THE VERY MONTH THE BABY IS DUE. AND AFTER GIVING BIRTH, THEY HAVE TO GO START WORK AGAIN IMMEDIATELY—OFTEN WITH THE INFANT IN TOW—JUST TO BE ABLE TO EARN ENOUGH FOR FOOD.
AFTER THAT, I ALSO THINK IT WOULD BE GOOD TO ESTABLISH SCHOLARSHIPS TO HELP STUDENTS FROM POOR FAMILIES.
AND I'D PUT MONEY INTO RESEARCHING HEARTIER BREEDS OF GRAIN AND RICE CROPS—ONES THAT CAN HELP WITHSTAND NATURAL DISASTERS.
BECAUSE IF THERE WERE ANOTHER EMERGENCY, NO MATTER HOW MUCH MONEY WAS IN THE TREASURY, IT WOULDN'T MATTER IF THERE WAS NO FOOD, WOULD IT? IN ORDER TO ENSURE COUNTLESS PEOPLE WON'T HAVE TO STARVE WHEN SUCH A TIME COMES...
...WE SHOULD TAKE ANY CHANCE WE HAVE TO PUT THE MONEY TO GOOD USE.
MONEY FOR RESEARCHING GRAIN AND RICE CROPS...?
YES.
WELL, WELL...

I-I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT THOSE THINGS, SO...
...IT ALL CAME BURSTING OUT...
BEING QUIZZED ON THE SPOT AND COMING UP WITH SUCH A RESPONSE. IT'S NOT SOMETHING EVERYONE CAN DO.
I WAS QUITE IMPRESSED BACK THERE.
REALLY? I SUGGESTED THAT HE SHOULDN'T PUSH HIMSELF SO HARD AFTER I FOUND HIM DEAD ASLEEP FROM FATIGUE.
HE'D PROBABLY REALIZED ON HIS OWN THAT HE NEEDED A LITTLE MORE REST.
AND YOU CONVINCED MINISTER KO TO TAKE A TEA BREAK EVERY DAY. I NEVER IMAGINED SUCH A THING COULD EVER HAPPEN!

YOU FOUND HIM ASLEEP?
YES. RIGHT THERE ON THAT SEAT.
...
SHU, DID YOU DO SOMETHING WHILE HE WAS SLEEPING?
HALT
N-NO, OF COURSE NOT!
VEEN
I... I TOUCHED HIS HAIR...
AHHH
HIS HAIR...?
W-WELL, IT'S JUST THAT IT'S SO BEAUTIFUL AND SHINY!
I JUST WANTED TO TOUCH IT AND SEE HOW IT FELT...
I MEAN, IF HE SOLD IT AT A KAMOJI SHOP, THEY'D BE SURE TO PAY HIM A SMALL FORTUNE!

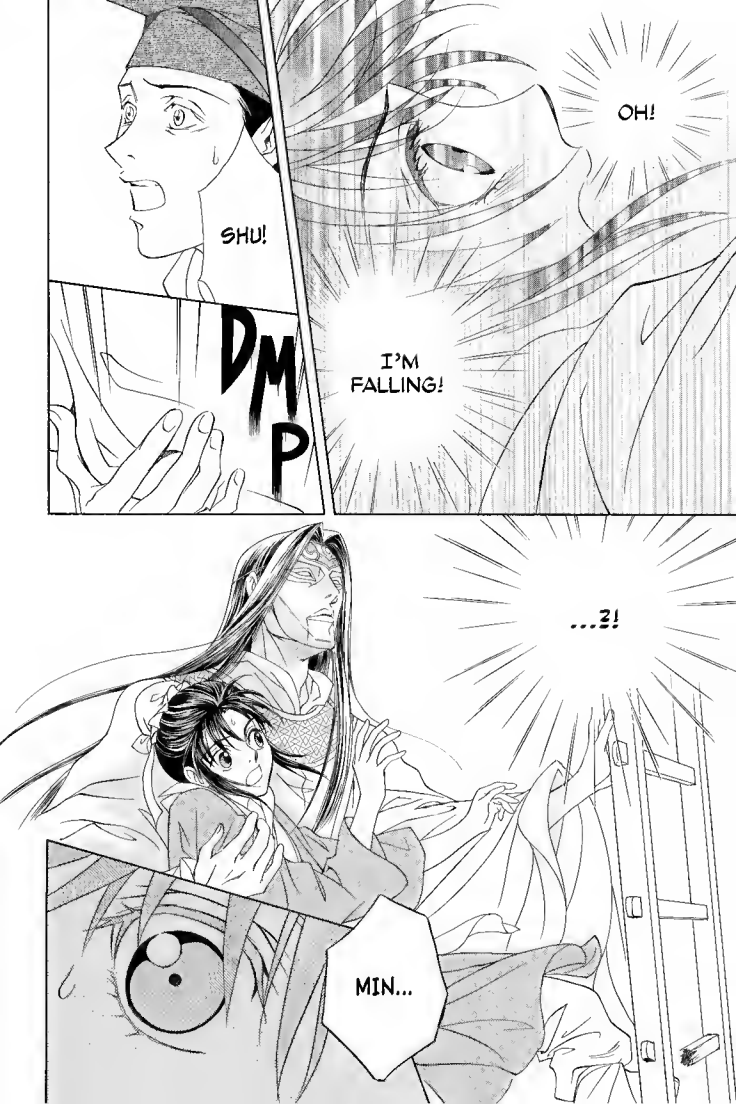
※ A kamoji is a hairpiece worn by ladies to fill out portions of their hair that have become thinned out.

FORGIVE ME.
SO THAT'S WHAT IT WAS.
HA HA HA
pbff
EH?
OF COURSE NOT! I WAS TAUGHT NEVER TO DO THINGS THAT COULD REALLY UPSET SOMEONE.
I'M NOT THE KIND OF PERSON WHO WOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF SOMEONE LIKE THAT.
SHU, YOU NEVER THOUGHT TO PEEK UNDER THE MINISTER'S MASK WHILE HE WAS ASLEEP?
IT WOULD TAKE UNBELIEVABLE RESOLVE TO HIDE YOUR FACE AWAY BEHIND A MASK FOR TEN WHOLE YEARS.
HOW COULD I NOT RESPECT HIS WISHES?
BUT...
UM... VICE MINISTER KEI?
YES?

I... HAVE...
HAVE YOU EVER SEEN MINISTER KO'S FACE?!
IT'S BEST NOT TO DISCUSS IT.
2!
IT MUST BE QUITE A FACE IF EVEN THE KIND-HEARTED VICE MINISTER KEI CAN'T BEAR TO TALK ABOUT IT...
Poor Minister Ko...
PITY
THOUGH HE HAS BEEN IN A BETTER MOOD LATELY.
HE REALLY SEEMS TO LIKE YOU.
I'LL HAVE TO THANK VICE MINISTER RI AGAIN FOR BRINGING YOU TO US.
HUH?

HE LIKES ME? THE MINISTER LIKES ME?
YES.
YOU ALWAYS PERFORM YOUR WORK METICULOUSLY, DOWN TO THE MINUTE DETAILS— USUALLY BEFORE I HAVE A CHANCE TO POINT THEM OUT TO YOU.
THE INKPOT IS ALWAYS FILLED TO THE BRIM.
BRUSHES WITH WORN-OUT TIPS ARE ALWAYS PROMPTLY CHANGED TO NEW ONES.
THERE IS ALWAYS ENOUGH BLANK PAPER.
MOST OF ALL, INSTEAD OF GETTING DISCOURAGED WHENEVER YOU ARE REPRIMANDED FOR AN ERROR, YOU ALWAYS MAKE SURE TO DO IT RIGHT THE NEXT TIME.
WITH THE ROOM ALWAYS CLEAN AND IN PERFECT ORDER, IT HAS BECOME A MUCH MORE PLEASANT PLACE TO WORK.
THOUGH HE'D NEVER SAY IT, I BELIEVE MINISTER KO IS VERY IMPRESSED WITH YOU.
AS AM I, OF COURSE.
YOU DON'T SEE MINISTER KO GETTING ANGRY AS OFTEN, DO YOU?
I THINK IT'S A SHAME YOU'RE ONLY HERE TEMPORARILY.

Here.
I ENJOY ASSISTING YOU, VICE MINISTER KEI.
THANK YOU VERY MUCH, SIR!
IT IS AMAZING THAT YOU CAN TELL HOW MINISTER KO IS FEELING, EVEN THOUGH HE ALWAYS WEARS A MASK.
OH? YOU MEAN YOU CAN'T?
HUH...?
smile
Here.
smile
I GUESS HE'D HAVE TO HAVE THOSE KINDS OF SKILLS TO BE THE VICE MINISTER...
smile
KRAK
?!


OH!
I'M FALLING!
SHU!
DMP
...?!
MIN...

Thank goodness you're all right, Shu.
THANK YOU SO MUCH!
HAVE ENSEI FIX THIS IMMEDIATELY.
I'M SO SORRY!
MIN-ISTER KO!
THAT WAS DANGEROUS. BE CAREFUL.
YURI...
TENGAI KO AND SONSHI HEKI HAVE BOTH COLLAPSED.
AH... LOOKS LIKE IT ALREADY WENT AND BROKE, DID IT?
Oops
GUESS I WAS A LITTLE TOO LATE.

WOW...
SO THEY FINALLY SUCCUMBED TO THE HEAT, HUH?
I SUPPOSE THEIR AGE FINALLY CAUGHT UP TO THEM.
W-WHAT?
EVEN THOSE TWO?
SHK
SHK
Yuri! Calm yourself.
BUT THAT MEANS...
...THE ENTIRE MINISTRY OF THE TREASURY IS NOW DOWN TO JUST THOSE TWO.
THOSE WHO HAD HEAT EXHAUSTION FIRST SHOULD SOON RECOVER ENOUGH TO RETURN...
SUMMER IS ALSO NEARING ITS END. WE NEED ONLY ENDURE FOR ANOTHER FIVE OR SIX DAYS.

I'LL HELP YOU AS MUCH AS I POSSIBLY CAN!
THAT IS, I... I'LL WORK MY HARDEST TOO!
UM, EXCUSE ME...
ENSEI WILL TOO, WON'T YOU?
SURE. WELL, AT LEAST WITH WHATEVER I'M CAPABLE OF.
I SHALL TEMPORARILY MAKE YOU AN OFFICIAL OF THIS MINISTRY.
AH...
YOU SHALL OVERSEE THE WORK TENGAI KO AND SONSHI HEKI WERE DOING.
ENSEI...
YES SIR?

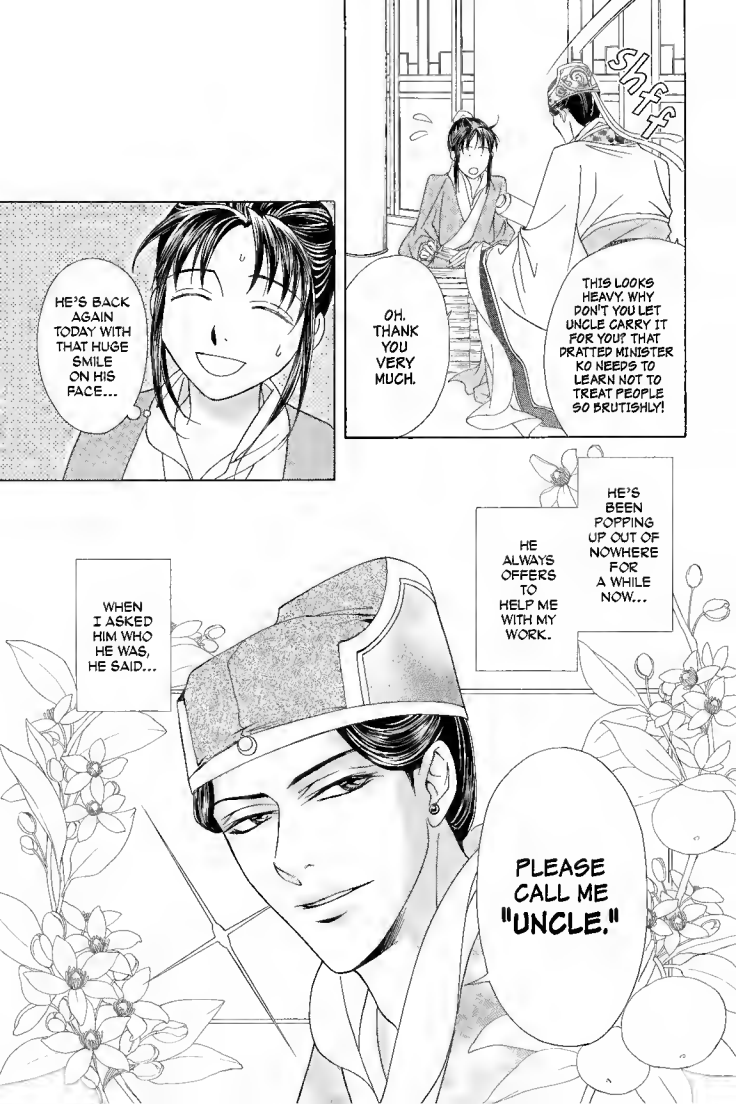
EH?!
ARE YOU SERIOUS?
I SHALL MAKE THE ARRANGEMENTS IMMEDIATELY...
...SO BEGIN WORK STRAIGHT AWAY.
ALL RIGHT THEN.
BUT DON'T BLAME ME IF YOU END UP REGRETTING IT.
...ENSEI RO.
I'M SURE YOU WILL BE EQUAL TO THE TASK...

WHAT?
ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THAT, MINISTER? TRUSTING ALL THAT TO THIS BEARDED RUFFIAN?!
Hey!
LEAVE MY BEARD OUT OF THIS!
YOU DON'T OBJECT, DO YOU, YURI?
NOT AT ALL.
MINISTER KO IS TAKING A BIG RISK.
I WONDER IF ENSEI IS UP TO THE TASK....
Sway

!
TO ME HE SEEMS BETTER SUITED TO BEING A SOLDIER THAN A CIVIL SERVANT.
THEN AGAIN, HE DID TELL ME HE ONCE STUDIED TO BE A PROVINCIAL BUREAU-CRAT...
SHUREI?!
THIS IS BAD!
IS THAT YOU, SHUREI?!
DASH
ARE YOU HERE?
NO... SHE COULDN'T BE HERE, COULD SHE...
SIGH

AUGH
FUMP
HOW DID HE SENSE ME SO QUICKLY?!
phoo
k-tmp
k-tmp
HE LEFT...
I CAN'T ALLOW US TO MEET HERE.
SINCE I HAVE NO INTENTION OF RETURNING TO THE INNER COURT AND LIVING MY LIFE THERE, I NEED TO KEEP FROM GETTING INVOLVED WITH RYUKI.
NO MATTER HOW MANY LETTERS OR GIFTS HE SENDS, I CAN NEVER REPLY.
IT'D BE FOR THE BEST IF HE FOUND A NEW CONSORT...
WHEN I LEFT THE INNER COURT, THE TIES BETWEEN US SHOULD HAVE BEEN SEVERED...
I HAD TO PUT DISTANCE BETWEEN US.

ONCE HE REALIZES HE TRULY WANTS SOMETHING, HE'S SURE TO HOLD ONTO IT FOR DEAR LIFE.
A LONELY EMPEROR, STARVED FOR AFFECTION...
MAYBE I GAVE HIM FALSE HOPE...
OH... IT'S YOU, UNCLE...
GRIN
WHAT ARE YOU UP TO, HIDING IN A LITTLE CORNER LIKE THAT?
HM, SHU?
B-BMP


Shff
THIS LOOKS HEAVY. WHY DON'T YOU LET UNCLE CARRY IT FOR YOU? THAT PRATTED MINISTER KO NEEDS TO LEARN NOT TO TREAT PEOPLE SO BRUTISHLY!
OH. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
HE'S BACK AGAIN TODAY WITH THAT HUGE SMILE ON HIS FACE...
HE'S BEEN POPPING UP OUT OF NOWHERE FOR A WHILE NOW...
HE ALWAYS OFFERS TO HELP ME WITH MY WORK.
WHEN I ASKED HIM WHO HE WAS, HE SAID...
PLEASE CALL ME "UNCLE."

UNCLE...?
OH!
hyup
N-NO, YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY ALL THAT!
HE'S FAIRLY YOUNG, BUT HE STRIKES ME AS SOMEONE WHO RANKS VERY HIGH IN THE PALACE.
cheery
cheery
HOW MANY TIMES MUST I TELL YOU?
I ALWAYS DO PRECISELY WHAT I WANT TO DO.
HE MUST JUST BE FLUSHED FROM THE HEAT...?

HONESTLY, HOW CAN HE WORK SUCH A SWEET YOUNG BOY LIKE YOU SO HARD...?
sigh
AH, I...
JOLT
THAT MAN! IT'S BECAUSE HE'S NEVER MANAGED TO GRASP THE CONCEPT OF HAVING LIMITS.
You're such a kind child, Shu.
THERE'S NO HELPING IT, SIR. TWO MORE OF THE MINISTER'S STAFF COLLAPSED FROM THE HEAT TODAY.
WE PASSED THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM THE SAME YEAR.
Oh? In that case...
YOU MUST BOTH BE VERY SMART!
ARE YOU AN ACQUAINTANCE OF MINISTER KO'S?
YES. INDEED, WE WERE CLASS-MATES.

HERE'S THE LAST OF THEM.
Regrettably...
THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
DEAR SHU, WON'T YOU CALL ME THAT ONE MORE TIME IN PARTING?
YOU KNOW...
flif flif
OH, I TRULY THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP...
...UNCLE!
BLISS
shiver shiver
See you again, Dear Shu!
SO THE "STRANGE ONE'S" CLASS-MATE...
...IS ANOTHER ECCEN-TRIC...

VICE MINISTER RI.
OH, VICE MINISTER KEI.
WHAT LUCK RUNNING INTO YOU.
DO YOU HAVE A MOMENT TO SPARE?
ACTUALLY, IT CONCERNS YOUNG SHU...
HAS HE BEEN CAUSING YOU ANY PROBLEMS?
THEY COULDN'T HAVE DISCOVERED SHE'S A GIRL?!
QUITE THE OPPOSITE. HE'S DONE SUCH GOOD WORK FOR US, WE REALLY HAVE TO THANK YOU AGAIN.

VICE MINISTER RI...
IT IS MY OPINION THAT THE BOY WOULD MAKE AN EXCELLENT CIVIL SERVANT.
HE HAS A GREAT LOVE AND HUNGER FOR LEARNING, PLUS HE'S QUICK-WITTED. HE'S TRULY AN INTELLIGENT BOY.
AND AS HE'S STILL QUITE YOUNG, I ASKED HIM IF HE WOULD TAKE THE CIVIL SERVICE EXAM.
TO WHICH HE ANSWERED, "I CAN'T."
HE SAID, "I CAN'T."
HE DIDN'T SAY HE DIDN'T WANT TO.
AS SHU IS A MEMBER OF THE HONG CLAN, I WAS WONDERING... IS IT BECAUSE OF SOME COMPLICATED MATTER WITH YOUR SUPERIOR THAT SHU IS UNABLE TO...?
Minister of Civil Affairs Reishin Hong...
Unmatched in cool-headed rationality, many refer to him as the Ice Minister.
THAT WOULD BE A TERRIBLE SHAME...
BECAUSE IF THAT WERE THE CASE, I WOULDN'T MIND BECOMING HIS SPONSOR INSTEAD..

WELL... NOT THAT MY FAMILY'S NAME IS WORTH SO VERY MUCH. WE'RE NOT ONE OF THE SEVEN NOBLE CLANS.
IN FACT, IF SHU WOULD WISH IT, I WOULD ADOPT HIM COMPLETELY AND ALLOW HIM TO LEAVE THE NAME OF HONG BEHIND.
THAT WAS WHY I WANTED TO ASK YOUR OPINION...
FOR SHU TO HAVE EARNED SUCH HIGH ESTEEM FROM YOU, VICE MINISTER KEI...
...IT MUST MEAN HE HAS THE POSSIBILITY OF A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD.
VICE MINISTER RI...
THAT SAID, I'M AFRAID SHU WILL HAVE TO TURN DOWN YOUR PROPOSAL, VICE MINISTER.
THOUGH IT IS A SHAME.

THE MATTER DOES NOT PERTAIN TO HIS FAMILY OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT, SO PLEASE SET YOUR MIND AT EASE.
THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR CONCERN FOR HIM.
MAY I ASK WHY?
I THINK YOU'LL UNDERSTAND SOON ENOUGH.
IT SEEMS YOU ALREADY HAVE SOME PLAN IN MIND FOR HIM.
I BELIEVE I MAY HAVE OVER-STEPPED MY BOUNDS IN THIS MATTER.
PLEASE PARDON ME AND FORGET I EVER MENTIONED THIS SILLY IDEA.
OH, NOT AT ALL. THANK YOU FOR YOUR KIND CONCERN.
IT SEEMS SENDING HIM TO WORK IN THE MINISTRY WAS WORTHWHILE AFTER ALL.

TO WORK UNDER SOMEONE LIKE HIM, YOU'D PROBABLY HAVE TO BE ABLE TO DO THAT, I SUPPOSE...
MY SUPERIOR WOULD TELL ME TO LOOK A HUNDRED STEPS AHEAD.
YOU ALWAYS SEEM TO BE LOOKING FIFTY STEPS AHEAD OF EVERYONE ELSE, VICE MINISTER RI.
IT'S PROBABLY BECAUSE I SOMEHOW HAD THE ABILITY TO GET USED TO THAT MASK.
NO, WELL... I CERTAINLY DON'T HAVE THE SELF-CONFIDENCE TO WORK AS MINISTER KO'S SECOND-IN-COMMAND FOR AS MANY YEARS AS YOU HAVE.
I HAVE A DOCUMENT TO DELIVER TO HIM.
TO HIS MAJESTY'S.
...WHERE ARE YOU HEADED NOW, VICE MINISTER KEI?
YES?
UM, IF I MAY ASK...

THEN IT WAS FORTUITOUS TO MEET YOU ON THE WAY. I WAS HEADED THERE MYSELF.
PLEASE LET ME ACCOMPANY YOU!
He was lost...
smile
?
smile
...again?!
SIGH

AHHH
THIS SENSE THAT SHE'S RIGHT BESIDE US IS PROBABLY JUST OUR OWN WISHFUL THINKING...
WHY ALL THE SIGHS, YOUR HIGHNESS?
tap tap
HAVE YOU LOOKED OVER THE REPORT YET?
IT'S STRANGE...
LATELY WE'VE BEEN FEELING AS THOUGH SHUREI IS SOMEHOW NEARBY...
MM, YES, WE HAVE. IT'S THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE HUNT FOR THE SA PROVINCE BANDITS, CORRECT?
OUR DEPLOYMENT OF THE YULIN GUARD HAS REAPED SOME EXCELLENT RESULTS!
YES, BUT...
I advise you to not go near them for a while...
LORD ADVISOR SOU AND HIGH GENERAL HAKU ARE BECOMING MORE DOUR BY THE DAY AS THIS UNKNOWN PARTY CONTINUES FINDING THE TARGETS FIRST.
THE MAJORITY OF THE CAPTURES HAVEN'T BEEN DONE BY THE YULIN GUARD, BUT BY SOME UNKNOWN PARTY WHO OPERATES AT NIGHT.

WELL, THAT ASIDE...
"WE ARE LOOKING FOR A MAN WITH A CROSS-SHAPED SCAR ON HIS LEFT CHEEK."
ALL THE APPREHENDED BANDITS HAVE TOLD US THE SAME STORY.
A MAN WITH A CROSS-SHAPED SCAR...
WHO IS THIS MAN?
IT'S NONE OTHER THAN...
...THE SA CLAN OF SA PROVINCE.
BUT WE HAVE LEARNED FOR WHOM THE BANDITS ARE WORKING.
WE'RE NOT SURE YET...

SA PROV-INCE...
WE HAVE HEARD THAT THE SA CLAN'S INFLUENCE IN SA PROVINCE HAS FOSTERED A HOTBED OF LOCAL DISSENTION AGAINST THE IMPERIAL GOVERNMENT.
SOME OF THE GOVERNORS ENDED UP BECOMING PUPPETS OF THE SA CLAN.
OTHERS ENDED UP DEAD.
YES, IT'S BEEN THAT WAY FOR A VERY LONG TIME. EVEN NOW THEY CONTINUE ANTAGONIZING EVERY IMPERIAL GOVERNOR WE SEND OUT THERE.
IT WENT ON UNTIL FINALLY NO ONE COULD BE FOUND WHO'D AGREE TO ACCEPT THE GOVERNORSHIP.
IT SEEMS ENJUN SA HAD BEEN KEEPING HIS CLAN UNDER CONTROL FOR SOME YEARS NOW.
BUT AFTER HIS DEATH THEY STARTED RISING UP AGAIN.
LORD ADVISOR SA...
WHAT ARE THESE BANDITS UNDER THE SA CLAN'S EMPLOY AIMING TO DO HERE IN SHI PROVINCE?

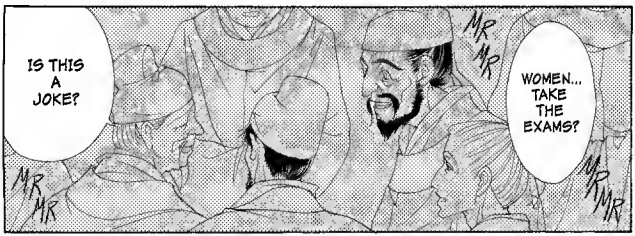
DID THEY FOLLOW THE MAN WITH THE CROSS-SHAPED SCAR HERE?
IT SEEMS THIS MAN HOLDS THE ANSWERS TO EVERY-THING.
SHUEI, MAKE SECURING HIM OUR PRIORITY!
YES, YOUR HIGH-NESS.
WE MUST FIND HIM BEFORE THE SA CLAN DOES.
YOU DO?
ACTUALLY, I ALREADY HAVE A GOOD IDEA OF HIS WHERE-ABOUTS.
THEN WE SHALL LEAVE THIS SITUATION IN YOUR HANDS.
YES, YOUR HIGH-NESS.

IT'S COMING ALONG. THE NUMBER OF REVISIONS KOYU DEMANDS WITH EACH DRAFT IS BECOMING FEWER AND FEWER.
IT WON'T BE LONG NOW.
IT SEEMS YOU'RE MAKING GOOD PROGRESS DRAFTING THE BILL.
SHUREI...
SHUREI...
grip

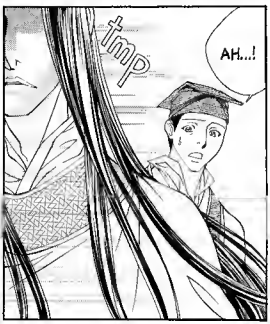
WITH THAT WE WILL CONCLUDE THIS MORNING'S COURT—
ONE MOMENT!
WE HAVE ONE LAST PROPOSITION WE WOULD LIKE TO PRESENT TO THE COURT BEFORE CLOSING THIS MORNING.
IT IS IN REGARDS TO THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM.
WE HEREBY PROPOSE THAT HENCEFORTH WOMEN SHOULD TAKE PART IN THE EXAMINATION!

Chapter 12
WE PROPOSE WOMEN BE ALLOWED...
...TO TAKE THE IMPERIAL CIVIL EXAM!

MRMR


IS THIS A JOKE?
MR MR
WOMEN... TAKE THE EXAMS?
MR MR

HOJU...


tmp
AH...!

I CAN HEAR IT...
HUH?
MM MM
MM MM
KRAK KRAK
KRAK KRAK
THE SOUND OF A CERTAIN SOMEONE'S PATIENCE REACHING ITS BREAKING POINT...
BAM
WHAT WERE YOU THINKING, DROPPING THAT ANNOUNCE-MENT OUT OF THE BLUE?!
YOU FOOL EMPEROR!

UH...
WE WERE EAGER...
THIS KIND OF THING TAKES MONTHS OF PLANNING TO LAY GROUND-WORK!
THAT BRASH ANNOUNCEMENT RESULTED IN MINISTER KO GETTING UP AND WALKING OUT!
IT WAS A FLAT-OUT REJECTION.
I TOLD YOU BEFORE, DIDN'T I?
FOR THIS PROPOSAL TO HAVE ANY HOPE OF PASSING, WE MUST HAVE MINISTER KO'S SUPPORT.
EVEN AFTER THE NUMBER OF TIMES I STRESSED HOW DELICATELY WE'D HAVE TO GO ABOUT MAKING THIS PROPOSAL, OUR SPOILED LITTLE LORD GOES AND DOES THIS...!
It's about time for some tea, isn't it? Anyone?
CALM DOWN, KOYU.
YES...
DO YOU KNOW HOW DIFFICULT IT'S GOING TO BE TO GET HIM TO RECONSIDER A PROPOSAL HE'S ALREADY REJECTED?

HAVE WE UTTERLY RUINED OUR CHANCES?
GLUM
DO NOT GO EASY ON HIM, SHUEI.
DOMP DOMP DOMP
THESE ARE PAST COURT TRANSCRIPTIONS AND DOCUMENTS FOR REFERENCE MATERIAL.
PLEASE READ THEM OVER.
YOUR OPPONENTS ARE OLDER AND WILIER POLITICIANS THAN YOU. YOU NEED TO LEARN HOW TO SPEAK TO THEM IN ORDER TO MAKE YOUR POINT HEARD.
I HAVE LAID PLANS TO HELP WITH THAT AS WELL.
WE'VE HAD A SETBACK, BUT IT ISN'T SO TERRIBLE THAT WE CAN'T RECOVER.
BUT ALL WILL BE FOR NAUGHT IF I CAN'T LICK OUR LIEGE OF HIS INOPPORTUNE BLABBERING!

We think we'd enjoy it if you licked us...
WHAT?
YOU REALLY ARE A KIND PERSON, KOYU.
...
For a military general I've gotten awfully good at making tea lately...
AH... I'VE MADE SOME CHILLED TEA FOR YOU BOTH.
WHAT KIND OF LUDICROUSNESS IS SPEWING FROM YOUR MOUTH NOW?!
You idiot emperor!
THE TEA IS READY.

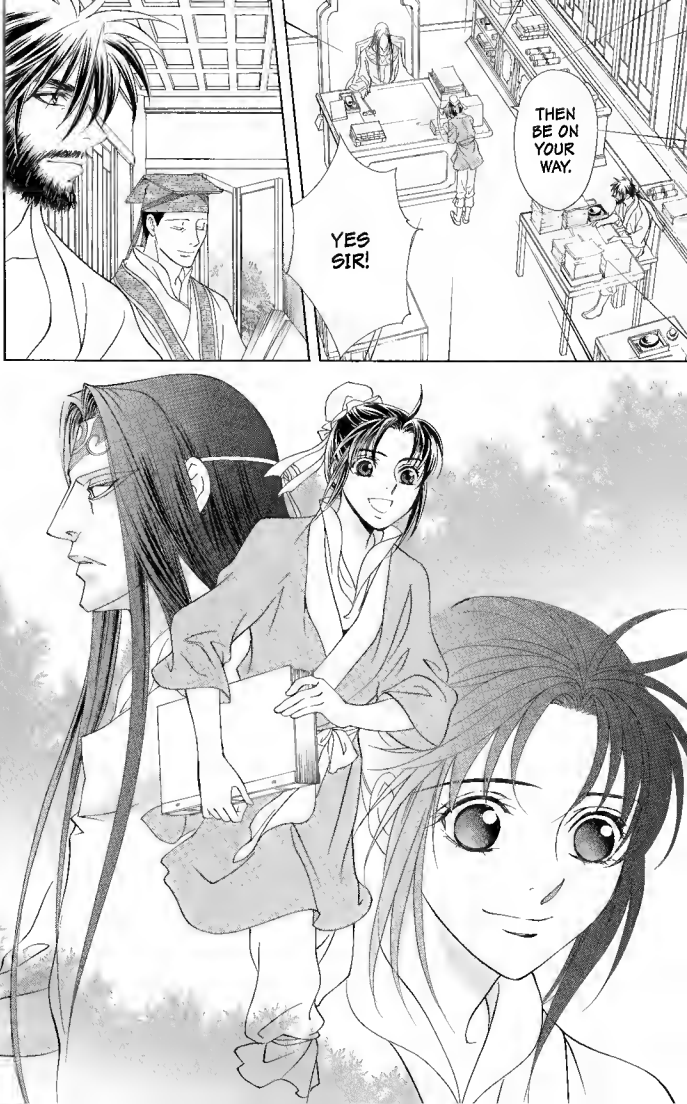
SOME-WHAT...
ENSEI? ARE YOU ALIVE?
THANK YOU, SHU.
OHO! I LIVE AGAIN!
THANK YOU FOR YOUR HARD WORK.
THAT MASKED TASK-MASTER OF OURS NEVER HOLDS BACK.
HE INCREASES MY WORKLOAD EACH DAY.
IT LOOKS LIKE YOU DO HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO PASS THE PROVINCIAL EXAM.
SO YOU'RE NOT JUST A BEARDED RUFFIAN AFTER ALL.
HOW MEAN!
Even though you don't put enough water on your brush...
MINISTER KO NEVER ASSIGNS WORK HE THINKS SOMEONE CAN'T DO.
IT'S HIS WAY OF SHOWING YOU THAT HE'S ACKNOWL-EDGING YOUR POTENTIAL.

SHU HONG.
COM-ING!
WHAT MAY I DO FOR YOU, SIR?
GO TO THE ARCHIVES AND BORROW THIS BOOK FOR ME. ONCE YOU'VE DONE THAT...
GO THROUGH THE CORRESPONDENCE WE RECEIVED TODAY AND SORT THEM BY IMPORTANCE. YOU CAN MAKE THOSE JUDGMENTS YOURSELF, I TRUST.
AFTER THAT...
YES SIR! I UNDER-STAND.
SHU HONG...
DO YOU WANT TO BE A CIVIL SERVANT?

UM...
...WANT TO BE...
DO I...
I-I...
FATHER...
WHY CAN'T GIRLS BECOME CIVIL SERVANTS?

THE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS ARE HERE TO PROTECT US, AREN'T THEY?
WHY DO THE TOWNS-PEOPLE HAVE TO SUFFER SO?
THEY HAVEN'T DONE ANYTHING WRONG.
WHY WON'T THEY COME HELP US?
WHY?
IT IS MY GREATEST DREAM TO BE A CIVIL SERVANT.
IT HAS BEEN EVER SINCE THE STRUGGLE FOR SUCCESSION EIGHT YEARS AGO.
I'VE FELT THAT WAY SINCE I WAS A YOUNG CHILD.
WOMEN CAN'T BECOME CIVIL SERVANTS.
EVEN KNOWING IT WAS AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM...
IT'S A DREAM I'VE... NEVER BEEN ABLE TO GIVE UP ON.

SHUP
I SEE.
READ THIS BOOK AND THEN PRESENT YOUR THOUGHTS ON IT TO ME.
I'LL HEAR YOUR CRITIQUE TOMORROW MORNING.
HUH?
UNLESS YOU DON'T THINK YOU CAN DO IT.
NO, NOT AT ALL, SIR— I'LL DO IT!
PLEASE LET ME!


YES SIR!
THEN BE ON YOUR WAY.

YOU AREN'T GOING OUT TONIGHT?
JOLT
SEIRAN.

IN ANY CASE, THE BANDITS WE'VE CAUGHT HAVE BEEN TELLING US THEY'RE LOOKING FOR "A MAN WITH A CROSS-SHAPED SCAR ON HIS LEFT CHEEK."
AH...
YOU THOUGHT YOU WOULDN'T BE?
I'VE BEEN FOUND OUT, HUH?
IF YOUR SKILLS HAD DIMINISHED ANY, PERHAPS I WOULD HAVE.
IT HAS BEEN OVER TEN YEARS. I GUESS I WAS HOPING YOU MIGHT'VE FORGOTTEN THE PARTICULARS OF MY STAFF FIGHTING BY NOW...
I HAVE NO INTEREST IN WHY YOU'RE SNEAKING OFF IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT TO DO BATTLE WITH BANDITS.
NOR DO I CARE WHY THEY'RE PURSUING YOU...
BUT I DO MIND YOU MAKING TROUBLE FOR MASTER HONG AND LADY SHURE!!

OH, I WAS JUST THINKING THAT YOU'D FOUND A NICE PLACE FOR YOURSELF HERE.
WHAT IS IT?
WHY ARE YOU SO PLEASED?
Heh heh
grin
grin
YOU'VE PROBABLY COME TO THE SAME CONCLUSION TOO, HAVEN'T YOU?
SAY, I WANTED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT THE PRINCESS. I THINK I'VE FIGURED OUT A WAY TO SOLVE ALL HER PROBLEMS.
Hm hm
YOU TWO SHOULD GET MARRIED!
smile

SHE'S NEVER FALLEN IN LOVE, RIGHT?
OR MAYBE I SHOULD SAY, SHE'S UNCONSCIOUSLY MADE HERSELF STEER CLEAR OF IT.
SHE PROBABLY THINKS THAT IF SHE FELL IN LOVE, SHE'D HAVE TO GET MARRIED AND HER DREAMS OF BECOMING A CIVIL SERVANT WOULD BE FOR NOTHING.
CHOOSING TO STUDY FOR THE CIVIL EXAM OVER FINDING TRUE LOVE... THAT'S ONE DETERMINED GIRL.
SHE'S GOT A LOT MORE GUMPTION THAN MOST BOYS OUT THERE.
AND SHE'S GOT YOU AT HER SIDE.
WHY WOULD SHE EVER LOOK AT A NORMAL, BUMBLING GUY WHEN SHE'S GOT YOU, RIGHT?

WORKING WITH HER EVERY DAY AT THE MINISTRY, I'VE COME TO REALIZE...
...THE PRINCESS IS REALLY SERIOUS ABOUT THIS STUFF.
EVEN NOW SHE'S UP IN HER ROOM HAPPILY READING HER "HOMEWORK" FROM MINISTER KO.
IF SHE WERE TO MARRY YOU, SHE COULD CONTINUE ON LIKE THIS, STUDYING HER HEART OUT, FOLLOWING HER DREAMS...

I CAN TELL BY JUST LOOKIN' AT YOU.
ENSEI...
See? See?
NOT TO MENTION, SHE'S THE ONLY GIRL YOU CARE FOR, ISN'T SHE?
WELL, SHE'S A GREAT GIRL, AND I'M SURE SHE'LL GROW UP TO BE A WONDERFUL WOMAN TOO. IF YOU WANT TO NAB HER, NOW'S THE TIME TO DO IT.
AND JUST THINK— THERE PROBABLY AREN'T MANY WOMEN WHO COULD LOVE YOU AND STAND TO BE AROUND YOU ALL DAY WITH YOUR LOUSY PERSONALITY.
YOU KNOW, I THINK I WILL GO TO HIGH GENERAL HAKU TOMORROW AND REPORT YOUR WHEREABOUTS TO HIM.
SHUT UP.
OOH!
SORRY!
I WON'T SAY ANY MORE!

SEI-RAAAN!
TOO LATE.
YOU SEEM TROUBLED, YOUNG MAN.
SHFF SHFF SHFF
YOU WRETCHED OLD—THAT IS, LORD ADVISOR SHO... WHAT ARE YOU DOING STILL TOTTERING AROUND AT THIS HOUR?
HMPH. THIS PALACE IS LIKE MY OWN HOME TO ME.
I've been walking these halls for 50 years now!

THIS IS OUR HOUSE, NOT YOURS!
HO! IS THIS A DRAFT OF YOUR NEW EXAM PROPOSAL?
flip
IF YOUR REASONS FOR DOING THIS DIDN'T EXTEND ENTIRELY FROM IMPURE MOTIVES, I WOULD COMMEND YOU.
he-hi hen
B-BE SILENT!
YOU SEEM TO BE IN QUITE A HURRY...
IT'S NOT POSSIBLE THAT YOU'RE PLANNING TO GET THIS PASSED IN TIME FOR THIS YEAR'S EXAM?
HOW DO YOU HAVE SO MUCH ENERGY IN THIS HEAT, ANYWAY?
Give it back!
OLD GEEZERS LIKE YOU SHOULD STAY COOPED UP IN THEIR ROOMS AND RETIRE FROM PALACE LIFE GRACEFULLY!
WHY DON'T YOU ACT LIKE AN OLD MAN AND PASS OUT FROM HEATSTROKE ONCE IN A WHILE OR SOMETHING?
Oh h...
AND HERE I DRAGGED MY POOR, OLD BONES ALL THE WAY HERE, THINKING I MIGHT BE OF SOME SERVICE TO YOUR MAJESTY. IN RETURN YOU SPEAK SUCH CRUEL WORDS TO YOUR OLD FAITHFUL RETAINER....

AH! YOU— STOP RIGHT THERE!
HMM, PERHAPS I'LL GO TO LADY SHUREI'S HOUSE TO GROAN AND COMPLAIN ABOUT YOU, SHALL I?
IF YOU WANT TO KEEP MY MOUTH FROM GRUMBLING, YOU'D BEST CONTINUE WORKING HARD.

MISSING SOME-ONE... HUH.
WHAT AN ODD FEELING...
IT'S DIFFERENT FROM THE LONELINESS WE FELT IN OUR YOUTH WHEN WE SPENT OUR DAYS ALONE.
IT ISN'T SUCH AN UNPLEASANT FEELING, AND YET, BEARING IT CAUSES SUCH A DEEP AND ACHING PAIN...
BUT FEELING LONELY BECAUSE WE MISS SOMEONE MEANS THAT WE ARE NOT TRULY ALONE.
BECAUSE THE ONE WE MISS WILL NOTICE WE ARE NOT BY THEIR SIDE AS WELL.
WE FINALLY CAME TO UNDERSTAND THAT AFTER THE TIME WE SPENT WITH SHUREI...
IT'S TRULY AN EXTRAVAGANT AND WONDERFUL KIND OF JOY.
YOU MUST BE WILLING TO WORK HARD IN ORDER TO OBTAIN SOMETHING YOU TRULY WANT.

IF YOU WANT TO BE LOVED AND NEEDED BY SOMEONE, YOU NEED TO MAKE THE EFFORT.
WHEN WE WERE YOUNG, WE WISHED SO DESPERATELY TO BE ACKNOWLEDGED BY OTHERS THAT WE ENDED UP FORGETTING HOW TO WORK TOWARD SOMETHING WE WANTED.
BUT WE ARE DIFFERENT NOW.
WE HAVE STARTED TO BELIEVE THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO REALLY DO NEED US.
BUT THE HARD WORK WE DO THESE DAYS ISN'T FOR THE SAKE OF REAPING BENEFITS...
YOU WILL SURELY BECOME A GREAT EMPEROR.
...WE UNDERSTAND NOW THAT IF ONE WORKS HARD, ALL THAT IS TRULY PRECIOUS WILL SURELY FOLLOW.
SHUREI TAUGHT US THAT.
SHU-REI...
BUT WE STILL MISS HER...

BUT I WAS REMEMBERING HOW THE CHERRY BLOSSOMS BACK HOME DON'T BLOOM ANYMORE.
I LOVE CHERRY BLOSSOMS.
VERY, VERY MUCH.

I DON'T HAVE MANY GOOD MEMORIES OF SUMMER.

ESPECIALLY WHEN THUNDER-STORMS COME...

Side Story

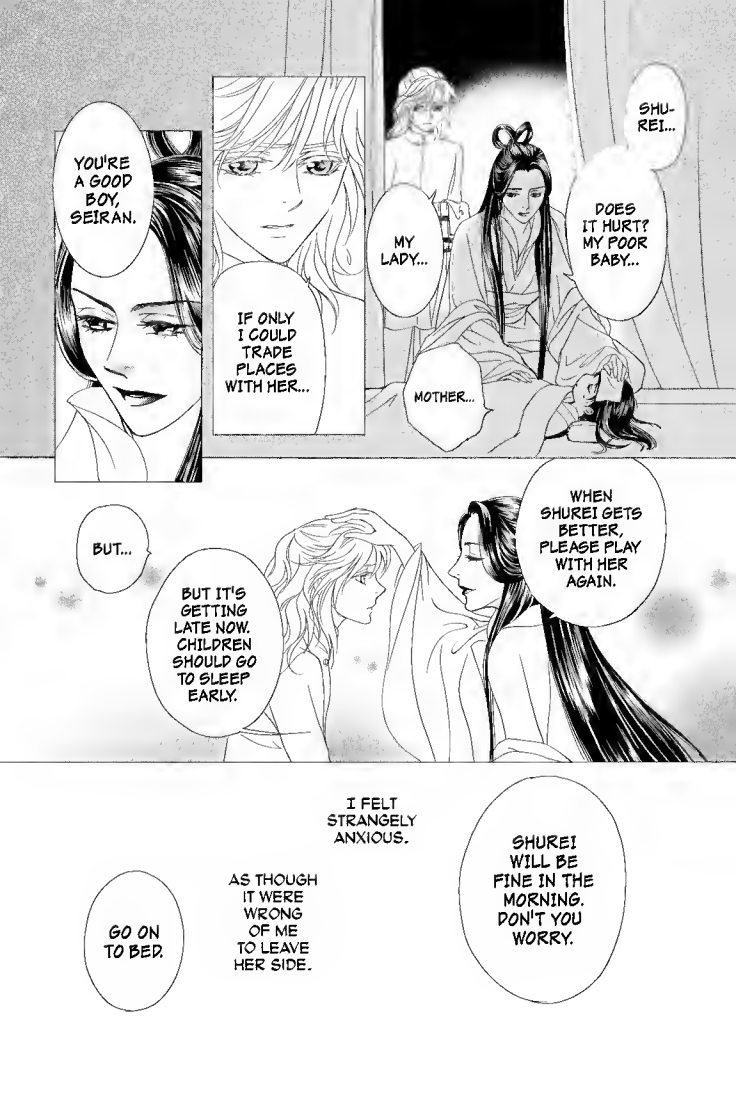
The Proper Way to Pass a Stormy Evening

SHWAA
AH!
THIS IS WHY I HATE SUMMER!!
...
THE LAUNDRY...!
PI-IP
PI-IP
AND I REALLY HATE....
...THUNDER-STORMS.
WAIT!
DON'T START YET!
I HATE SUMMER.
NO!
NO!
RHHM RHHM RHHM
EEEK!
FWASH
OH!
K-OFF
K-OFF
FWIP

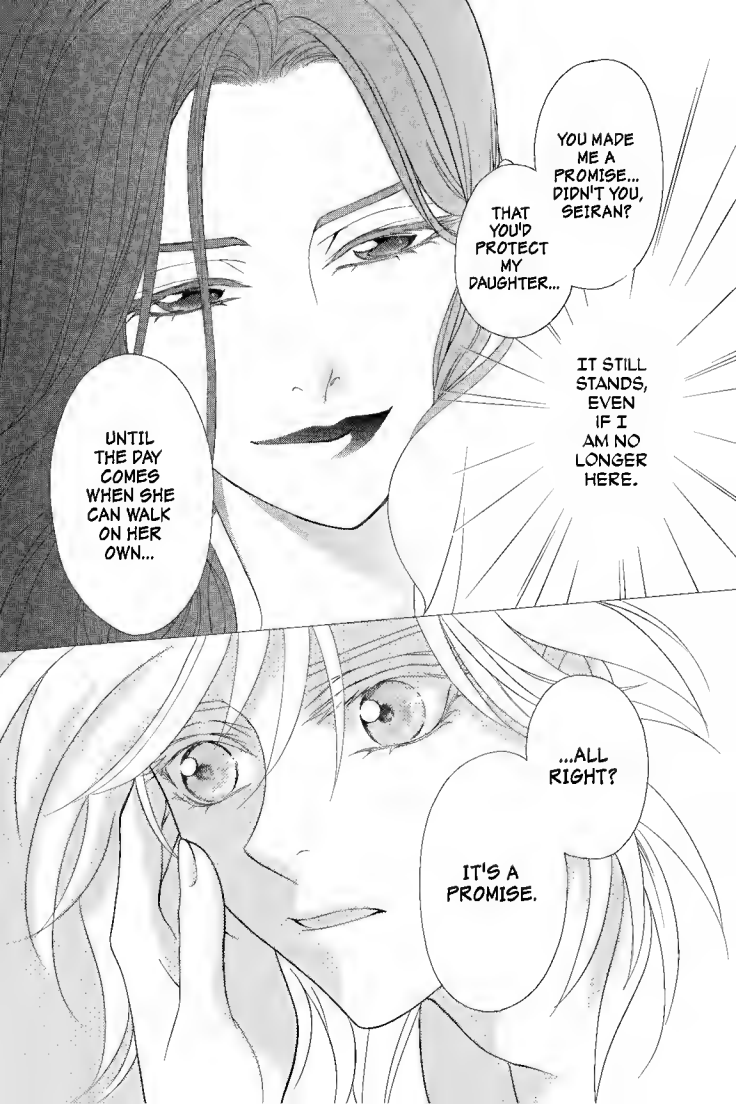
ENSEI, THERE AREN'T ANY LEFT OUTSIDE, ARE THERE?
NOPE. THIS IS ALL OF 'EM.
IT'S BEEN A WHILE SINCE WE'VE HAD SUCH A HEAVY EVENING RAINFALL, THOUGH, HUH?
HUH?
DOMP
Hey...
SEIRAN...
YOU SURE IT'S OKAY NOT TO HEAD BACK TO THE PRINCESS?
SHWAA
YEAH...
SHE DOESN'T HANDLE THUNDER TOO WELL, RIGHT?
I'LL BE A NICE GUY AND STAY HERE FOLDING THE LAUNDRY OR SOMETHING, AND YOU CAN GO BACK.
ENSEI...

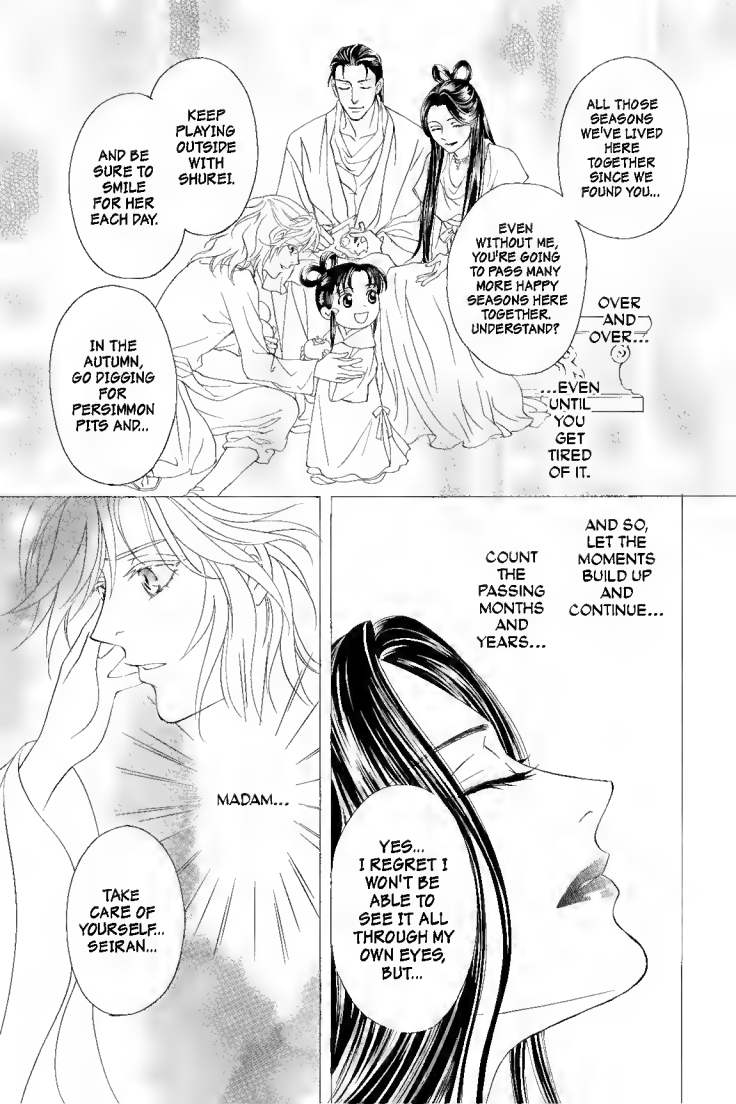
YOU DON'T THINK SHE WOULD'VE LEFT THE HOUSE, DO YOU?
MY LADY?
YOU COME TOO.
Hey! Hey!
HUH?
DEF-INITELY NOT.
SHE'S NOT HERE.
blunt
HOW CAN YOU BE SO SURE?
THERE'S NOTHING ABOUT MY LADY THAT I DON'T KNOW!
You say that, but...
...
I'LL SEARCH THE HOUSE. YOU GO TAKE A QUICK LOOK IN THE GARDEN.
RIGHT.
MY LADY?
WHERE ARE YOU?

MADAM...
TMP
KEE
RHM RHM
IT'S JUST LIKE THAT DAY.
THE PALE, SUFFUSED LIGHT...
THE OMINOUS SOUND OF THUNDER...
M... MOTHER...
huff huff
huff
wheeze wheeze


SHU-REI...
DOES IT HURT? MY POOR BABY...
MY LADY...
MOTHER...
IF ONLY I COULD TRADE PLACES WITH HER...
YOU'RE A GOOD BOY, SEIRAN.
WHEN SHUREI GETS BETTER, PLEASE PLAY WITH HER AGAIN.
BUT...
BUT IT'S GETTING LATE NOW. CHILDREN SHOULD GO TO SLEEP EARLY.
I FELT STRANGELY ANXIOUS.
SHUREI WILL BE FINE IN THE MORNING. DON'T YOU WORRY.
AS THOUGH IT WERE WRONG OF ME TO LEAVE HER SIDE.
GO ON TO BED.

KRAK
MADAM!
RHHM RHHM RHHM
COME HERE.
YOU MADE IT JUST IN TIME.


YOU MADE ME A PROMISE... DIDN'T YOU, SEIRAN?
THAT YOU'D PROTECT MY DAUGHTER...
IT STILL STANDS, EVEN IF I AM NO LONGER HERE.
UNTIL THE DAY COMES WHEN SHE CAN WALK ON HER OWN...
...ALL RIGHT?
IT'S A PROMISE.


ALL THOSE SEASONS WE'VE LIVED HERE TOGETHER SINCE WE FOUND YOU...
KEEP PLAYING OUTSIDE WITH SHUREI.
AND BE SURE TO SMILE FOR HER EACH DAY.
EVEN WITHOUT ME, YOU'RE GOING TO PASS MANY MORE HAPPY SEASONS HERE TOGETHER. UNDERSTAND?
OVER AND OVER...
...EVEN UNTIL YOU GET TIRED OF IT.
IN THE AUTUMN, GO DIGGING FOR PERSIMMON PITS AND..
AND SO, LET THE MOMENTS BUILD UP AND CONTINUE...
COUNT THE PASSING MONTHS AND YEARS...
MADAM...
YES... I REGRET I WON'T BE ABLE TO SEE IT ALL THROUGH MY OWN EYES, BUT...
TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF... SEIRAN...

MOTHER?
I'M ALL BETTER NOW.
MOTHER?
THAT NIGHT...
MY LADY...
MOTHER, PLAY YOUR NIKO FOR ME.

...AS THOUGH THE THUNDER AND LIGHTNING HAD STOLEN HER AWAY...
...MADAM PASSED ON.
YO! SEI-RAN!
BONK
ARE YOU STILL JUST STANDING AROUND? WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?
YOU FREE-LOADING INGRATE...
You hit me with your fist?
WHAT DO YOU—
WHAT ARE YOU GETTING ALL SENTIMENTAL ABOUT ANYWAY?
POW
...!
KLUNK
LOOKS LIKE WE'RE SHORT A KEY.

THE KEY TO THE SHED.
KLAK
MUDD
KATT
BAM BAM
WHAT?
WHAT'S THAT NOISE?
KATT
TAT TAT
BAM
Pek
UMPH
EEEEK

SEIRAN.
OH
HEH
NO, THAT WAS ABSOLUTELY THE APPROPRIATE WAY TO GREET YOU.
WHY ARE YOU SCREAMING AT ME? HOW RUDE!
WIP
WE'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU, MY LADY.
EN... ENSEI?
HA HA HA HA HA HA
PRINCESS! YOU LOOK LIKE A LITTLE SNOW WAIF! OR MAYBE A DARUMA DOLL!!
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, "SNOW WAIF"?!
YOU'LL CATCH COLDS.
YOU KNOW— THOSE LITTLE HOODED KIDS THAT APPEAR TO DANCE AROUND OUTSIDE WHENEVER IT STARTS SNOWING.
YOU MEAN FAERIES?!
ARGH
SEIRAN, THERE'S ANOTHER BLANKET IN HERE SOMEWHERE, ISN'T THERE?
YES.
YOU'RE BOTH SOAKING WET!
OH...

Heh heh
BUT MY LADY, IT'S SAID THAT IDIOTS NEVER CATCH COLDS.
SO I DOUBT A LITTLE RAIN WILL HAVE ANY EFFECT ON HIM. HE'S PACKED WITH MUSCLES ALL THE WAY INTO HIS BRAIN.
Don't be kind to a bearded bear like him...
OH YEAH? IT'S ALSO SAID THAT ONLY AN IDIOT WOULD CATCH A COLD IN THE SUMMER!
AND WHY SHOULD YOU BE SO PROUD OF BEING AN IDIOT, HM?
You're just jealous I got the princess's blanket
THEY ARE FRIENDS, RIGHT?
PRINCESS, HOW EXACTLY DO YOU USUALLY SPEND THESE KINDS OF STORMY NIGHTS?
HUH? SCREAM-ING...
And the like.
RHM RHM RHM RHM
WHAT ABOUT YOU, SEIRAN?
I STAY WITH HER...
YOU TWO JUST SPEND THE WHOLE STORM SITTING TOGETHER WITHOUT TALKING?
BACK-GROUND GHOSTS?!
YOU'RE LIKE BACKGROUND GHOSTS!
Hey!

I'M JUST SAYING YOU SHOULD'VE TRIED A LITTLE HARDER TO TAKE HER MIND OFF IT.
IS THERE A BETTER WAY TO SPEND A STORM THEN?
YOU KNOW, SOMETHING LIKE... SINGING, OR—
SING-ING?!
THOOM
SING!
EEEEEK!!
WHY ME?!
OKAY. YOU SING THEN.
ME?
I DON'T HAVE A CHOICE NOW.
YES! RIGHT NOW I'M SO SCARED THAT I COULDN'T MANAGE A SINGLE NOTE...
ONCE A RICE ROLL ROLL, ROLL, RO-O-O-OLLED, AND MERRILY STOLE AWAAAAAY—

WEDDED WERE THEY, AND FROM THAT FATEFUL DAY, THEY WERE THE RED PICKLE RICE RO-O-O-OLL!
WHEN LO, AT LAST, UPON A HILL, HE MET HIS LOVE, A RED PICKLE—
HUH?
A KIDS' SONG?
AND SUNG IN SUCH A DEEP VOICE...!
BEH
AH HA HA
DON'T LAUGH!
BWA HA
RHYM RHYM
I'M SORRY, ENSEI! BUT YOU REALLY SANG MUCH BETTER THAN I THOUGHT YOU WOULD. SING SOME MORE!
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, "BETTER THAN YOU THOUGHT I WOULD"?!

SANG SEVERAL SONGS
OKAY, NO MORE.
HAVE SEIRAN SING TO YOU NEXT.
Ahh, that was great!
Klap klap klap
PRINCESS, WHAT WERE YOU DOING POKING AROUND IN HERE ANYWAY?
HUH? OH... I WAS JUST LOOKING FOR SOME-THING.
Kreek
Kreek
LOOKS LIKE THE WIND IS STARTING UP AGAIN.
I HOPE THE ROOF TILES HOLD UP.
KLAT
KLAT
HUH?
KRASH
WHOA!
ENSEI?!
SOMETHING CAME TUMBLING DOWN.
That was close!
THREE LITTLE DICE?
AND A BOWL...? WAIT, THIS IS...

HUH?
BUT THIS IS...
YOU WERE LOOKING FOR THIS, PRINCESS?
THAT'S IT! THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR!
THAT'S...
...A CHINCHI-RORIN SET.
YOU ROLL ALL THREE DICE IN THE BOWL, AND THE WINNER IS DECIDED BY THE RESULT.
DESPITE ITS SIMPLE APPEARANCE, IT IS, WITHOUT A DOUBT, A GAMBLERS' GAME.
I REMEMBER SEEING YOU WHEN I WOULD GET UP TO USE THE LAVATORY. YOU WERE ALL HAVING SUCH A GOOD TIME.
FATHER AND MOTHER AND YOU USED TO STAY UP PLAYING UNTIL LATE INTO THE NIGHT, REMEMBER?
?
M-MY LADY... WHY WERE YOU LOOKING FOR THAT?

BUT I WONDER WHY THIS WAS PUT AWAY ALL WRAPPED UP AND SHOVED IN A CORNER... AS THOUGH TO KEEP IT HIDDEN.
HEY, SEIRAN... JUST WHAT KIND OF PERSON WAS THE PRINCESS'S MOTHER?
パシッ
SOMEHOW SHE STRIKES ME LESS AS A MEEK HOUSE-WIFE AND MORE AS A REAL GAMBLING CONNOISSEUR WITH PLENTY OF SAVVY.
パシッ
SHE WAS A CONSUMMATE GAMBLER WHO DRANK LIKE A FISH AND NEVER SEEMED TO REACH HER LIMIT.
SHE WAS A VERY GOOD PLAYER... WHILE SHE HAD HER EVENING DRINK, SHE OFTEN MADE ME PLAY HER.
INSTEAD OF GAMBLING WITH MONEY, EVERY TIME I LOST, I HAD TO DRINK ANOTHER CUP OF WINE.
PLAYING WITH NO MERCY EVEN AGAINST A KID? COME ON, NOW!
IT'S THANKS TO THOSE DAYS THAT I HAVE SUCH A HIGH TOLERANCE FOR ALCOHOL NOW.
I TOLD MY MOTHER, "WHEN I GET BETTER, LET ME PLAY TOO."
EVERY YEAR WHEN SUMMER ROLLS AROUND, I SUDDENLY REMEMBER THAT AND COME LOOKING IN THE SHED FOR THE GAME.

ENSEI!
REALLY?
OKAY, THEN! WHY DON'T THE THREE OF US PLAY UNTIL THE STORM IS OVER?
WHAT ARE YOU THINKING, OFFERING TO TEACH LADY SHUREI TO PLAY CHINCHI-RORIN?!
PSST
PSST
IT'S FINE IF WE DON'T BET, ISN'T IT? WE'LL JUST PLAY FOR FUN TO SEE WHO WINS AND WHO LOSES.
OR MAYBE, JUST BETWEEN YOU AND ME, WE CAN BET A LITTLE...
FINE, THEN! AND IF I WIN, FOR SEVEN WHOLE DAYS...
...YOU HAVE TO LET ME EAT AS MANY EXTRA HELP-INGS OF THE PRINCESS'S COOKING AS I WANT WITH-OUT MAKING A SINGLE COMPLAINT!
ALL RIGHT. IF I WIN, YOU WILL REPAIR ALL THE DAMAGE TO THE ROOF CAUSED BY THIS STORM— ON YOUR OWN!

ARAAK
THOOM
I'M GOING TO START NOW, IF IT'S ALL RIGHT WITH YOU TWO?
FOUR DAYS!
I SAID THREE!
FINE. FIVE DAYS!
BRING IT DOWN TO THREE DAYS, AND WE WON'T COVER THE COST OF YOUR EXTRA HELPINGS. HAVE A LITTLE HUMILITY, CONSIDERING YOU'RE MOOCHING OFF US FOR FREE!
Actually, I pay for his extra helpings.
KIAI
Yes, Father. Here's your tea.
Thank you.
THAT WAS QUITE SOME THUNDER WE HAD TODAY. WERE YOU ALL RIGHT, SHUREI?
GWI
YES. THANKS TO ENSEI, I DIDN'T MIND THE THUNDER TOO MUCH.
He helped me take in the laundry too.

IF HE HADN'T, SUMMER THIS YEAR WOULD HAVE BEEN JUST AS BAD AS ALL THE REST.
I'M GRATEFUL ENSEI CAME TO US.
I'M GLAD TO HEAR THAT.
THE MEMORIES OF THAT SUMMER WHEN SHE PASSED AWAY ALWAYS BRING US BACK TOO CLOSE TO THE BITTER REGRETS AND DESPAIR WE FELT...
IT'S SOMETHING WE STILL FIND HARD TO TALK OR EVEN THINK ABOUT.
BUT TIME FLOWS ON.
AND EVEN IF IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR US NOW, SOMEDAY WE WILL BE ABLE TO LOOK BACK AND HAVE HAPPY MEMORIES OF SUMMER TOO.
I NOTICED THAT ENSEI ATE ONLY ONE HELPING AT DINNER TODAY.
HE SEEMED A LITTLE DOWN, DIDN'T HE? THAT'S A BIT WORRISOME...
YOU NOTICED IT TOO, FATHER?
SEIRAN ALSO SEEMED A LITTLE GLOOMY AS WELL. HE BARELY SAID THREE WORDS OVER DINNER.

TOK
TOK
TOK
TOK
TOK
TOK
...
MAYBE I'LL TAKE SOME RICE BALLS UP TO THEM LATER.
7 DRAWS 10 LOSSES
57 ROUNDS 42 WINS
TIED AT 5 WINS APIECE
AFTER I TRIED SO HARD TO KEEP LADY SHUREI CLEAR OF THE EVILS OF GAMBLING FOR SO LONG...
BUT SHE DOES HAVE MADAM'S BLOOD FLOWING THROUGH HER VEINS...
I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. GAMBLING AGAINST THE PRINCESS AMOUNTED TO WHAT WOULD BE LOSING THE SHIRT OFF MY BACK.
I MAY HAVE UNLEASHED A MONSTER BY TEACHING HER TO PLAY...
GASP
YOU DON'T THINK THAT FROM NOW ON WHENEVER IT STARTS STORMING, SHE'LL MAKE POOR VICE MINISTER KEI PLAY CHINCHIRORIN WITH HER, DO YOU?!
HOW SHOULD I KNOW?!
TOK
TOK
TOK
TOK
SAY, FATHER...
HM?

HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF A GAME CALLED CHINCHI-RORIN?
2!
...I LOVE YOU.
SHOKA...
I TRULY WAS BLESSED, WASN'T I?
AND I ADORE SHUREI AND SEIRAN MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS WORLD.
...MY HUSBAND...

Kairi Yura was born on January 16. She is the illustrator of both the manga and the YA novels for *The Story of Saiunkoku*. She is also the creator of the *Angelique* series. Yura's hobby is going to the theater.

Sai Yukino was born on January 26. She is author of both the manga and the YA novels for *The Story of Saiunkoku*. She received an honorable mention and the Readers' Award for Kadokawa's Beans Novel Taisho Awards. When she's not busy writing, Yukino enjoys massages.

THE STORY OF SAIUNKOKU
Volume 3

Shojo Beat Edition

ART
KAIRI YURA
STORY
SAI YUKINO

Translation & English Adaptation/Su Mon Han
Touch-up Art & Lettering/Sabrina Heep
Design/Yukiko Whitley
Editor/Nancy Thistlethwaite

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